

You will hear a scream.

Go to 1.

You will not hear a scream.

Go to 0.

to the Instructions.
YOU CHOOSE: Scream, A
Virtual Reality. Go to the title

YOU CHOOSE

- Quantum Adventure
- of Choice or
- Entanglement or
- Indeterminacy or
- Causality or
- Immersion or
- Freedom and
- Constraint or
- Many Worlds or
- Go to 1 or -1.

go to the Back Cover.

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You
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Nick Stokes

to make a list before you scream.

YOU CHOOSE

by Nick Stokes and You

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Smashwords Edition



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You Choose is a fiction. If any fictions within are truths, the truths are likewise fictions. You are within.

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INSTRUCTIONS

or

HOW TO READ “YOU CHOOSE: Scream, A Virtual Reality”

This is your book. Do with it what you want. Burn it. Piss on it. Sleep with it. Take it for a walk. Wipe your ass with it. Read it. Not in that order. Read it in whatever order you choose. It’s your book.

You continue to read the instructions; instructions continue to be written. Some choices on how to read your adventure, you choose:

1. Straight through, ignoring instructions. Ingesting this entire world, or the worlds within this world, as one world, one adventure, at once, or as near as possible because you can’t read every word at the same time.
 - a. Front to back
 - b. Back to front
2. Read one adventure and only one adventure. That is, at each choice, make a choice and live with it. The choices you do not choose cease to exist.
3. Live one adventure until the end of your story, then go back to the last choice and choose differently, and repeat, until you think but are not entirely sure if you’ve read all the words and lived all available adventures.
 - a. Diagram your adventures to not lose yourself in the book or leave part of yourself in a completed adventure.
 - i. A map.
 - ii. Or maps.
 - b. Use a writing implement to mark where you’ve been. It’s your book.
4. Chronologically. In which case you may need to impose your own chronology, to invent your own time, or rather many times, in order to order events consecutively. You may also need to decide something about simultaneity.
5. Even integers first. Or else odd. Then the other way around.
6. Randomly. As in reading whatever pages you happen to open your book too in successive iterations. Good luck achieving randomness.
7. A numerology of your own design.

You are done reading instructions; instruction ceases. Exercise your free will.

-1.

Choose:

Go to 1 to scream into existence.
Go to 0 to not.

0.

Swallow the scream before it is screamed. Sacrifice yourself. Inhale the scream. Die and die preemptively and thereby do not succumb. You alone cannot prevent or end the scream, but you can choose to not become it. If fighting the scream, doing your small part, which you can only hope sums with others' small parts to end the tyranny of the scream, renders you silent evermore, as it does, so be it. Life is worth the sacrifice. Having not yet lived,

Go to 2.

Leap to action and step outside and get shot in the head.

Go to 2.

Leap into action. Step outside. Tackle the man who holds your elderly East Neighbor at gunpoint. Knock him out with the butt of his gun. Receive many handshakes and pats on the back and admiring gazes as the police take him away. Feel sheepish at the adulation. Secretly swell with pride of purpose fulfilled. Feel heroic. Feel sad when your East Neighbor dies about a year later from cancer of the something. Go about your life. Get up every morning.

Go to 195.

1.

Your sentence does not make you happy. Go to 4.

Your sentence makes you happy. Go to 5.

2

You die.

The End.

3.

You unfold the square of gray and there is the eye staring up at your haggard sunken ashen face. The Women scream in terror. You were right. You decorously fold the handkerchief and tuck it into your belt that holds up nothing but a few frayed threads and your modesty under scabs and grime. The spooked Women of Gray flap, leave the ground, and thud back to earth without sight. They scratch and squabble and peck blindly, nowhere near you.

- Where's the eye?
- Stolen!
- Find it!
- Don't go near that monster!
- Monster?
- Where are you?
- I'm here.
- I'm here.

Will they throw their wings around each other and huddle in blind company or lose each other in a frantic pointless search for their eye? You don't wait to find out and you do not return the eye. You blend into the gray, striding straight into the depthlessness, picking a direction, making a decision and sticking to it, adhering to your choice without waffling, your word is what defines you, your words and your actions, your words and your actions and your intentions, your words and your actions and your intentions and your choices, until the gray hardens and squeezes and closes around you like stone.

If you decide you went east, writhe twice forever to 54.
If it seems you chose west, scuffle many forevers to 156
and discover that even though you were in fact going
west, as you suspected, you ended in the East.
If you inadvertently marched south, wriggle forever to
30.

4.

Some things you don't get to decide. You are here.

Go to 5.

5.

Whether by live placental birth following sexual intercourse or an accidental character mitosis or meiosis or your mushrooming mycelium spread or fis/fusion or spore hatch or nuclear decay, or by some principle such as Heizenberg's or the angiosperm revolution or literary engagement, or by a commitment to tease out or flirt with or arouse all the possibilities of the multiverse, or as many as you

can touch in body or mind, you are here. Happy with who you are or unhappy with who you are, or neither happy nor unhappy with who you are, or both happy and unhappy with who you are, you are who you are. And nobody else.

You are the author of your story, if there is a story.

This story is your story and nobody else's. Feel unique. Your story is not meant to make you happy, and it is not meant to make you unhappy. It is not meant. Your story makes you you, and/or your story makes you, and/or you make your story. You are the one living it, creating it. If at any point you become sufficiently unhappy with who you are or with the story you live, you can, since it's your story, find a tall building or a deep river or a full pill bottle or a loaded gun or an accelerant and an incendiary and proceed directly to 2. There is always a choice. There is always 2.

You don't want to continue. You don't want anything to happen to you and you don't want to do and you don't want to endure and experience even if this is your only chance because living your story is too depressing or boring or pointless or painful or scream-inducing. You want to end your story and close your book forever. Go to 2.

You want to know what you do. You want to do what you can do, given your options. You have only one story to live; you may as well make of it what you can; you'll get to experience the nothing outside of it for the rest of eternity. You want to be who you are and become what you will be and bring your consciousness to bear while you've got it. You want to continue your story. Go to 6.

6.

You hear a scream.

Go to 194.

7.

You ask in all sincerity, When did the scream occur?

You answer sincerely,

10:30 pm. Go to 42.

I don't know. Go to 100.

8.

Wiping blood off your forearms, you repeat patiently, When did the scream

occur?

Not feeling pain of greater intensity than a paper cut, you answer with self-assurance,

6:15 pm. Go to 43.

I don't know. Go to 102.

9.

Holding your fingers compassionately in your hand you ask, When did the scream occur?

Consoled to some extent but longing for band-aids, you tremulously answer,

4:44 am. Go to 44.

I don't know. Go to 104.

10.

Flinging your fingers across the room, you bring your face close to your face, blocking the light, and scream, When did the scream occur?

Shrinking into your chair, the three fingers you don't have throbbing with your fluttering pulse, you spit the first answer that pops into your head,

2:19 am. Go to 45.

I don't know. Go to 106.

11.

You tire of yourself, you who do nothing. You concomitantly tire of the world, the world where nothing happens to you, nothing changes, nothing is done. You consider taking yourself to 2 to end the doing nothing, to 2 yourself.

You don't quit.

There was a scream, but you can barely recall it. Could you repeat it, replay it, reproduce it? You cannot reproduce with it, and what would the begetting get you, besides? More screams, and you struggle enough with one.

Rest assured, everyone else wearies of you as well.

You may be entirely right. There may be nothing to be done, nothing useful to do, nothing to do worth doing about the scream. But what are you going to do, nothing? Nothing is a boring choice, and harder to do than you think. It's a boring way to live your one and only story, leaving or giving the more exciting stories to the other you's in other worlds, even if their more compelling stories are as futile as yours. Even if their stories are yours. Or your story is theirs. Don't concern yourself with others. Act in your own interest. Forget the story of human progress, and develop your own.

You could sit here until whoever caused the scream comes to your door and

enters your house and turns you into a scream too.

You again bring your attention to bear on the possibility that nothing happens to you because you do nothing. That the onus is yours. No one does nothing to you. The world is inanimate, unconscious, incoherent, non-sentient. Don't blame the world for how it is; it apologizes; it can't help it. If you don't like it, change it. Change the world, one choice at a time.

Don't worry about if you believe in change, or if you change the world for better or worse. Determine who was the victim of the scream, why they screamed the scream, how the scream was drawn from their taught lips, where the perpetrator has gone, and how their portfolio has performed lately. Remove the scream's cause from your world, for better or worse. Such is your directive, since you seem to need a directive. Be a detective. When you're through, no one will ever scream for the same reason again. Solve the scream. Give your victim a reason for having screamed: enduring the pain that created the scream in order to destroy it.

You realize you have two choices. Fuck the phone, a useless contrivance. An impediment to your goal. You have two tools: your brain and your feet. You can either walk out your door and chase the scream, or you can stay where you are and use your brain to investigate the scream, solve the scream, identify the scream's cause, catch the scream's perpetrator, and eradicate the scream from existence. Staying in would free you to call and order pizza. You're hungry.

Remember this decision could determine the trajectory of the rest of your life and will define who you are now, until your next choice.

You go out the door to 192 to investigate.

You stay in at 32 to investigate.

You don't know which to choose. You want to scream. You do, a little.

No no no, you – You start over for clarity. You are you. This is you. You will not shuck responsibility. You will reap it. Or sow it. Or winnow it. You will make the right choice and catch a scream and help real people besides yourself.

You keep changing your mind before you choose because after you choose you will be unable to change your mind.

Some tips to help you decide:

-- Decide.

-- Decide which option is heads and which tails and flip a coin. Go with the option that lands face up. Don't doubt the veracity of the coin, and if you do go with the facedown option, do so with confidence because you have discovered a truth about yourself.

-- Recite "eenie, meenie, minie, mo, catch a tiger by its toe, if it hollers let it

go, my mother told me to choose the very best one, and this is not it," alternating choices with each word. This advice is virtually useless when there are only two choices because you are smart enough to accurately predict on which choice you'll land once you decide on which choice to start. Unless you are accomplished in self-deception and can convince yourself you don't know the results before you begin, in which case you'll land where you want to land and choose the choice you unconsciously want to choose, unless your unconscious chooses the choice your unconscious does not want because it goes in for self-hatred or -privations or -torture. Since your conscious is doing a shit job of running the show, your unconscious may deserve a shot.

-- Make a list of the pros and cons for each choice. In which case you'll have to decide yourself what the pros and cons are and what weight each receives and if you value quality over quantity when making your list-based choice.

-- Find a neutral third party. (Check upstairs first -- don't ask us, we're too immersed in you, we're engrossed by what you do and don't do, and we cannot hold anything you give us to hold in our hands, which is what you're about to ask us to do if you don't know, we looked ahead, with our eyes, which are with you along with our heads and our hearts, even if for you we are handless. If there's a wife upstairs, perhaps she'll make the decision for you and you will be absolved. If there's no wife there, or if she is unconscious or otherwise unresponsive, and you wish to find another, you'll have to go out the door, which would be a decision, a decision she thankfully made for you whether she exists or not.) To this ambivalent or apathetic or ambiguous person from outside your story you must give two straws (hay straws or drinking straws) cut to different lengths, which he or she holds in a hand so they appear to be the same length. Choose one with your right hand, one with your left. Whichever hand holds the smaller straw must make the choice. The other hand is liberated from responsibility, though not from the consequences the choosing hand incurs.

-- Write each option on a piece of paper and pass them between your hands behind your back until you don't know which is which, hand or choice. This may take a while, don't be afraid, the best things come to those who wait. Choose a hand. Just do it. Whichever hand you like best. Not hard. You have only two hands to choose from.

-- Find a baseball bat (handy for defending yourself against screams); stand it vertically on the ground, barrel down; touch your nose to the end of the handle; spin around it ten times as fast as possible without breaking contact between nose and bat or bat and ground. Stand erect and try to walk to the door. If you make it without bashing your head into the corner of a table and concussing yourself or pulling the bookshelf on top of you as you grope for stability or

breaking your hip when you fall like an excessively aware if a tad self-conscious and somewhat misanthropic angel disabused and tossed from the rectilinear world that you always knew was a fabrication, a prison, a drug, into the dizzying world of curves and the shortest means to point B from A being not a straight line, a place where time is movement, where time jukes and jives, a place where your desires burn, insatiable, where you suddenly have to decide for yourself where to go and what to do when you have never made a free decision in your life, then go out the door. If not, do not.

-- Choose.

-- Choose your own adventure. Choose my adventure. Chose our adventure. Just choose an adventure. Please, for all of us who so desperately need an adventure, a distraction from your monotonous life, an escape from our wearisome lives, a purpose in a purposeless life, an adventure.

Longing for external action, you go out the door to 192 to investigate.

Longing for internal action, you stay in at 32 to investigate.

PS -- If you are stoically committed to doing something -- the world can be ameliorated and the scream mitigated -- but you stalwartly fantasize that you need not choose between external and internal action to investigate and excavate the scream, then you may imagine that you have the choice to choose 112.

PPS -- If you absolutely cannot choose, a condition we understand and empathize with though we find it a weakness in your character and ours, or if you are paralyzed by uncertainty or the Uncertainty Principle, or if you have relinquished your volition (a symptom common to readers) or simply long for the adventure of random chance, Einstein's roll of the dice, the flap of butterfly wings, you instead (without looking ahead to see where you're going or else this is all pointless and calculated and pre-determined and dead) embrace your free will with one hand while simultaneously pushing it away with the other to choose at random to:

Go to 24.

or

Go to 26.

or

Go to 28.

12.

Your phone begs for use like a drug. This variety of situation is why telephones were invented -- to communicate over a distance, to protect

communication, to speed communication, to clarify communication, to make communication possible. To not hazard your person.

There are policemen somewhere in this city or township or county. They are probably begging to be used less. Like prostitutes, except, like prostitutes, they need the work. Without work they are laid off and unpaid and debadged. They become illicit detectives. Or would. The poor choices of humans provide their living, and humans' poor choosing makes for excellent job security.

Policemen, like prostitutes, exist to take on your moral and bodily risk. They are purifying scapegoats, hairy sacrifices bleating until the priest slits.

Sometimes you wax grandiloquent; you can't help yourself.

You could call. The cops, not a prostitute. It's unclear why prostitutes have crept into your thoughts. Temptation, most likely. Titillation, perhaps. Distraction, certainly. The age-old embedding of tenuous moral fiber in the heart of man, possibly. Sex, doubtlessly. Prostitutes though are not all they're made out to be in stories, like cops, like you, like everybody. Which is why you don't call anyone much. Which reminds you, your mother has been begging for a call. You are explicitly not calling your mother right now. Think of how nonplussed she'd be when you reenacted the scream over the phone. But as long as the cops are willing to assume the moral and bodily risk laid on you by the scream -- not the prostitute, there is no prostitute -- perhaps they would also be willing to call your mother for you.

Yes, you could do what most people would do: call the cops, "not call" the prostitute, and not call your mother just yet in hopes of someone else doing it for you. The cops will act according to the law; the law will make the choices for them; that's why the law was written, so that neither they nor you need think on and loose sleep over and choose what is right every moment of everyday in this goddamn everlasting life. Which would be exhausting.

Call the cops, take the world off your shoulders, ask them to hold it for a moment while you find shoulder pads, then you'll take it back and call your mother, you promise. You need shoulder pads, you deserve them, it aches to bear the titanic weight of this immortal scream. Call the cops. Calling the cops is the action required of you by your social contract, whether or not you signed it. If you investigated instead of calling them, they would ask you, Why?, a nauseating question, and suspect you. There is no good reason for you to risk your life, your moral self-regard, your innocence, your ideals, your self-definition, your freedom to call a prostitute or your mother if you so chose. If you do not call the cops, you may feel compelled to action before long, and who knows what that will lead to, who knows when you will return if you step out that door. Think of the chickens clucking in the backyard, hungry and sitting on

an ever-growing clutch of eggs. Think of your job, even if you don't have one and would happily never return to it. Think of whatever you're leaving upstairs, your wife and children even if you don't have a wife and children. Call the cops. They'll do everything for you. There is no reason for you to not call the cops. All reason says, Call the cops.

You call the cops and go to 88.

You don't call the cops and go to 20.

13.

You could have acted quickly, but now there's no reason to hurry. You could have stepped outside your door immediately and possibly seen a figure running away and duly noted a description as he or she passed through the light of the streetlamp, or perhaps heard a door slam and profoundly observed which door, or maybe seen and heard a getaway car peeling out and thoroughly written down the make and model and license plate number if you were fortunate. But that time is gone. Unless whoever caused the scream is also taking their time, being thorough, making no mistakes, wiping up their prints, waiting for suspicion to wane, waiting for innocuous night sounds to rise and time to begin again, waiting for you to poke your head out your door and see nothing and draw it back in. In which case now may be the moment to act and go outside and see them, the perpetrators, if it is a them, plurality just occurred to you, if not a him or a her. Or they could yet wait inside, waiting patiently until after you appear and subsequently disappear to reveal themselves. In which case perhaps you should outwait them. Or else show yourself, hide yourself, and then show yourself again in rapid succession, to sleuthily nab them as they reveal themselves, believing the coast is clear, when it is in fact foggy. Or they could be waiting outside your door with a gun or a cleaver or a board impregnated with rusty nails or a box of thumbtacks or a mask of rats. In which case perhaps you should do nothing. Or go out the back door. Unless they've anticipated you. They could wait at both doors. They could because of your repeated, validating use of the plural pronoun because of its stream-lined, neutered functionality in comparison to the unwieldy, sex-obsessed "he or she." Or you could encounter your neighbors also wondering from whence the scream came, and thereby find peace of mind in community. Unless your neighbor, east or west, was neither the screamer nor another innocent scream hearer, but the screamee. Which would redefine your sense of community.

All things being equal, which they aren't, though you're unsure of the value of each possibility, or rather the possibility of each possibility, you probably would've been safest acting promptly and without thought and opening your

door and stepping outside to see what was the matter immediately after the scream. As close to simultaneously as possible. If there were a perpetrator, he or she would not have been prepared for you. As it is, it is no longer a choice, and you were not aware at the time that it was one, so you do not regret not choosing it. You feel good about the preparations you undertake before action. No regrets. You will choose wisely, not rashly, when you choose. For the moment, what you decide you definitely do not want to do is act promptly late.

You inch to 19.

14.

You cannot forget it. Not yet.

It is as if it repeats, this scream. The scream keeps screaming. No, screams do not scream. Someone screamed the scream. The scream keeps being screamed. The scream keeps being scrum. The scream keeps being. The scream is rescrum repeatedly -- a shriek, a wail, a plaintive cry -- no, always the same, blood-curdling, spine-tingling, lymph-freezing, brain-lobotomizing, sphincter-tightening, heart-rending, bile-boiling, egg-shattering, hair-curling, sperm-shrивeling, toe-tingling, there are no other words for it, no more elucidating descriptors. Always the scream.

Except the scream has ceased and does not repeat. Whoever screamed the scream does not scream again. Whoever scrum the scream screams no more. You are a brave man -- you mean human, no you mean man, you cannot abstain from this male identity you've assumed or this male tone that's assumed you and you must decide something sometime and what better to decide first than your gender? -- to make so bold a statement bleeding at once of finality and neverendingness.

The scream repeats in your head; you cannot forget it. The scream is still being scrum by the you in your head. As you can imagine, your head, enclosing a scream, starts to hurt.

Except you don't hear the scream in your head. You hear its silence. The you in you doesn't scream the scream in your head you don't hear. There is no scream here. Hearing the scream is not why you cannot forget it. Rather, hearing it once is exactly why you cannot forget it, but continuing to hear its repetition is not, or not exactly, why you cannot forget it. Though there is on occasion an echo of the original, as if the scream has finally returned to you after bouncing off some distant wall or as if the scream slows as it travels through the morass of your gray matter from one cranial wall to another or as if at each iteration another you on another solitary peak yodels the scream on to the next you and each time the message is more corrupted like a sick game of telephone with

yourself, mostly why you cannot forget the scream is how it has changed you.

Or maybe not. The scream in all likelihood has not significantly changed you. It didn't blind you or deafen you or decapitate you like the royal or revolutionary French. It's the tails the scream left, not like snake tails that constitute the entirety of the snake or lizard tails that lizards drop to escape predators or the unforgettable tail you copulated with so many moons ago, nor like if you were to tail the perfect crime's perpetrator or victim. No, perhaps you cannot forget the scream because of the tails left like mining tails, a vibrant effluent, red orange yellow, colorless, washed into your brain, a residue left in the cracks, your valleys, the synaptic clefts, a pollution deposited in your low-lying areas as you refine this vulgar useless incomprehensible scream into a valuable commodity.

Or maybe the tails preventing you from forgetting the scream are tales. Heroic yarns. Or trails, worm holes.

Or maybe the scream is the first noteworthy event to happen to you in as long as you remember.

You don't remember what you were doing before the scream. Reading a book, probably. Doesn't matter. You're not who you were and even if you are, it's irrelevant. You cannot go back to reading after that scream.

You go to 18.

15.

There is silence.

The scream was sufficiently loud to traverse the small space insulating you from your neighbors -- to vibrate through their white gypsum drywall and pink fiberglass insulation and muted blue polyurethane siding to vibrate the air molecules into other adjacent air molecules into air molecules which collided with and vibrated your muted green polyurethane siding and pink fiberglass insulation and white gypsum drywall, the scream entering your house the same way it exited theirs, except in reverse, if it originated from a neighbor's house, and despite being dampened in intensity vibrate with sufficient fervor to pound on your ear drums -- and be loud. Your head rings still.

The scream, gone, rings in the silence.

You look out the window. Windows. You live in a narrow house; you can look out the window facing east and the window facing west simultaneously. Not quite simultaneously because your eyes aren't on the side of your head like a horse. You're not a prey animal. And you have only one head. You're not a Hydra waiting for Hercules to decapitate you again and again and again, confident in your immortality and endless supply of heads. There is only one of you to do the work of being you, this looking out windows and listening. This

isn't Many Worlds Theory where everything is possible, not possible but in fact is, all possibilities existing in their own world. Or if it is, then you are unaware of the you in the other worlds, which is fine, because how could you ever complete your task if you knew that another you was currently completing a slight variation? How could you make a choice if you knew another you would choose the opposite alternative, or all yours all alternatives? How could you hear a scream if in another world you did not?

What is your task? You heard a scream.

You look out the windows. Darkness. You see nothing or next to nothing. East: in the haze cast from the street lamp, the maple's bare forking branches reiterated in the veined splay of red leaves fallen, dried, curled, and turned brown in winter. West: in the dimness -- it's dark but is it true dark? -- perhaps the dark amorphous shape of a raccoon knocking the lid off the garbage can. Clattering.

You have two next-door neighbors, one east and one west. You don't know from which direction the scream emanated. Neither house emits light. From outside your house it might appear that you did not have a light on, your light being weak, a light for reading. The houses mostly dark then, on a winter night, when you don't know how late it is because the dark is long on a winter night and because you refuse to look at a clock out of a stubborn need to insurrect time and inculcate mystery and incubate obfuscation and to be forever in the dark, to be in the present moment, not the past or future. The only way to determine in retrospect which direction the scream came from is to go knock on one of your next-door neighbor's doors and ask, Did you hear a scream?

You go to 17.

16.

You heard a scream. You suspect it came from next door. You don't know what to do about it.

A SCREAM.

Written in all caps you find the disembodied scream more compelling, like your little brother poking you repeatedly with a stick in the kidney while you try to ignore him.

The scream wasn't a child's scream. You've heard children scream in anger, in play, in fear in the darkness of night, in insane joy at tackling their sibling, in pain after hitting their head on the corner of the table while chasing a sibling or being chased by a sibling while playing knights and dragons or prince and princess or cowboys and Indians or superheroes and villains or good guys and bad guys while screaming You already said that! and No I didn't! or You can't

catch me! and I'm gonna get you! or Mine! and Mine! This was not a child's scream.

You've heard parents screaming at children and children screaming at parents. You've heard husbands screaming at wives and wives screaming at husbands. You've heard the unhinged in the street screaming at no one. You've heard the hinged screaming in the street at everyone. This scream was none of them.

The scream was wordless. You've heard lovers scream like copulating chimpanzees. You have screamed like a copulating chimpanzee while making love. There was no love you know in the scream. The scream was animal, but not the scream of a copulating chimpanzee's. You've heard the screams of cats, of cougars, of baby rabbits trapped in their den by a gila monster while they and their siblings are eaten slowly and the small lumps of dissolving baby rabbit travel through the lizard's throat and engorge his belly until he cannot walk.

The scream was not an animal's, even if it was animal. The scream was a man's. By a man you mean a man or a woman, not a man but man. The scream was man's. The scream was human. You are human. Humans do not often scream. A scream is a rare event. Except perhaps in war, but you don't know much about war and as far as you know there is no war next door. And if there is?

You don't know that humans do not often scream.

You wait for another scream. You wait for another sound to give meaning to the scream. You wait.

You listen.

You wait.

You wait through 15.

17.

You are alone in your small narrow house not much larger than an apartment and set near-at-hand to its neighbors. You must live alone. Where could your wife and children be at this time of night, whatever time it is, be it 6 pm or midnight or 6 am on a northern winter night, if you had them? Perhaps you had them, but not longer. Divorced, estranged, gone. Was it your fault? Partly yes, partly no.

Or perhaps they are asleep upstairs. You don't want to go upstairs to find out because you don't want to wake them if they are asleep. Small children screaming in the night, small children not sleeping, the sleep of small children is one of your many nemeses.

Regardless of if they exist or not, your wife and children are not here with you in the downstairs containing the living room and kitchen and office and a

door probably leading to a bathroom and another door probably leading to a closet and what is certainly a front door and what is most likely a back door. Is this room an office, or is it a den or parlor or sitting room? You sit in it. Your wife and children could give you no advice as to the vector of the yet ringing but silent scream, which they are extremely unlikely to have heard in a conscious way, being either asleep or nonexistent.

Which leaves you with your eastern neighbor and your western neighbor, neither of whom you're friendly with nor particularly know, you are so different from them, though they seem a lot like you in some characteristics, such as you suspect they'd prefer to be asleep at this whatever hour, it's so late, or it might be.

Maybe you can forget the scream.

You attempt to forget to 14.

18.

You won't read. Not reading is not a choice you'll have to make. Reading isn't an option.

You're in your story, and characters or actors or real people in stories do not read their stories. They live them.

Though you don't think about that complication much. It's simply impossible to read with all the wagging scream tails.

What then do characters or actors or real people do in the stories they live after hearing a calf-butchered scream? you ask yourself.

That depends on who they are, you answer. A mother might do one thing, a widower another. A military veteran might look for a perpetrator to shoot or hide under the table having flashbacks or act reasonably and not decide on a course of action without contemplation. A military veteran might act decisively due to their training, or they may wait for a superior to tell them what to do, due to their training.

You deduce that what you can know, prognosticate, deduce about what a person will do in any given situation, such as after hearing a veal-searing scream, based on their profession, past or present, is limited.

You are a detective. Not in the trained, licensed, practicing sense of the appellate detective. More in the sense of you just heard a lobster-boiling scream and you wonder who screamed it and why. You are a detective less in the sense of investigating crimes and more in the sense of being naturally inclined to figure. To pursue unknowns. To prod, to hypothesize, to explain. You are trained as an engineer – you solve problems. Or you were a lit major – you theorize on the meaning of symbols and obfuscations and fictions and alternates. Or else

you're an astrophysicist searching for the origins of the universe, if and how quickly it expands, and how it will end. Or you're a philosopher philosophizing on if yours is the only universe or the meaning of history or how to live. A teacher trying to determine what's wrong with your students that they can't learn the scientific method. A doctor diagnosing a disease. A researcher researching a cure. A lawyer litigating truth. A janitor cleaning up rubbish. A businessman capitalizing on an opportunity. A geneticist ameliorating, an accountant adding up the bottom line, a code writer forging an applicable tool from language, a taxi driver delivering a fare, an electrician troubleshooting, a copier repairman repairing, an administrator delegating, a drywaller marking a stud, a homemaker triaging, a public relations representative branding a narrative, a nurse storytelling, a farmer driving the combine, a detective.

You are a detective. You are a man, so to speak. Unmentionables. You heard a window-shattering scream that shattered no windows except the metaphorical ones that aren't here. What do you do?

You ask to 13.

19.

You will act decisively when the time is right, not before, not after.

The time does not feel right. It feels jumpy. Will time skip right over the time when you will act decisively? Will you miss it?

You consider the possibility that what you ought to do about the scream is nothing. Not nothing now and something later, which is what you are currently doing, but nothing forever. The scream was not and is not yours, after all. Everyone has a right to privacy, to conduct their own affairs, to their own life. If your neighbor's phone rings and you hear it through the window and he does not answer, it is not your responsibility to answer it. If his dog poops in your yard, it is not your responsibility to pick it up. If the branches of his oak tree shade your garden, it is not your responsibility to prune it. If your hens wake him at dawn with their boking, it is not your fault he's a night owl; it's not your responsibility to silence their boking; it's what chickens do; you can't make them stop, unless you cut off their heads. It is in fact your responsibility to not do these things, unless a hen stops laying or it becomes more worthwhile to eat chicken tonight than eggs for the remainder of its productive lifespan. It is your responsibility to give your neighbor the personal space to do what they want to do about the scream.

Doing nothing forever about the scream would cover the possibility that your neighbor east or west has the scream under control. Which is a distinct possibility, as there has been no further screaming. In which case your intrusion

would be a nuisance. It also covers the possibility that your neighbor east or west does not have the scream under control, but nevertheless would find your offers of assistance intrusive, such as when you offered eggs to whichever one of them you offered eggs to once. It also covers the possibility that the scream was in your head, which you doubt. Screams don't pop into heads unbidden, and you've never been the creative type -- you site the list of your possible professions as evidence. You're a confident person. The only lingering doubt to your doubt about the scream being in your head is that you have yet to acquire any material evidence to substantiate the scream happening to anyone but you. You've yet to investigate beyond your walls, or to them. All you know for certain is you have been changed by the scream -- you choose change because if there is no change you might scream -- but if nothing and no one else has been changed or altered or affected, did the scream never happen? Doing nothing forever about the scream would save you face, save you the embarrassment of asking your neighbors if they heard a scream if they heard no scream because there was no scream. Or if you were the one who screamed. Also, doing nothing forever about the scream might be the right thing to do if your neighbor east or west is already dead, decapitated for example, head lolling in a pool of blood, and the killer is already long gone and there's nothing for you to do about it except give yourself a post-traumatic stress disorder by encountering your neighbor's liberated head, east or west. You're not a real detective, and the cops will come soon anyway, at least once the body begins to putrefy and a neighbor calls them, or perhaps the mailman or milkman or newspaper boy will call them if there are any of those left by next week, and once the police come they will either catch the killer themselves if he can be caught or not if he cannot. Your involvement would only dirty your hands, waste your precious time, perhaps implicate you unnecessarily, and cause major complications in your life that include but are not limited to losing your job if you have a job, losing your wife if you have a wife, losing your will to live in the face of brutality and suffering if you have a will to live, and never returning to the reading you were probably doing before the scream.

A happy side effect of choosing to do nothing forever about the scream is that you would not have to continue deciding what to do about the scream.

You acknowledge that your neighbor east or west could be lying in a pool of their own blood, only partially decapitated, so that timely intervention could save their life, or that the failed murderer yet remains in the house but is about to escape forever, or that they've left some time-sensitive evidence that will soon disappear, such as a piece of cheese a mouse will eat, or a mouse a cat will eat, or a cat a dog will eat, or that your neighbor east or west simply needs help climbing our from under the pile of books and the bookshelf that fell on her

while climbing for a book on the top shelf, or that he needs a hug after bonking his head on the corner of the cabinet or a beer after dropping a case of beer on her toe, the toe nail of which will eventually turn black and fall off. But you're not sure that the possibility of any of these events is greater than the possibility of the events which would cause you to choose to do nothing forever about the scream.

Even if those events which beg your response to the scream are less probable, does some moral responsibility after a scream of unknown cause and origin act as a multiplier, such as multiplying their probability times five, to make them relatively more relevant when deciding what to do? Is their importance, when multiplied by five, or the appropriate integer, now greater than the importance of the do-nothing possibilities? Are the do-nothing possibilities multiplied by 1, or by a fraction?

All of which is to say you do not deny the existence of moral responsibility in the world. The suffering of others should be weighed as an act of human decency.

What if your neighbors do not require as much personal space as you and would welcome your intrusion? However, basing your decisions on what you think another wants is an exercise in empathy. Since you're not clairvoyant any exercise in empathy is an opportunity to make a bad choice, to bastardize the golden rule of do unto others what you would do unto yourself, and you would not turn this into an exercise in learning from your bad choices. Because, for one, you've learned that learning from a bad choice is often overstated. Your neighbors have plenty of other neighbors who could do something about the scream, approximately as many neighbors as you, which is many more neighbors than you need. And you learned a lesson this morning, dropping the son you may or may not have off at school. You encountered a child face down on the sidewalk in his or her winter jacket. He or she was approximately three and gender is hard to ascertain at that age. You thought, What is wrong with this child? Should I help it? Everyone else, parents and children, stepped around it unperturbed, as if it weren't there, and perhaps it wasn't for them, and you had to drop off your son and your daughter at two different schools at the same time, and it would surely still be lying there crying when you exited the premises, so you stepped over it, entered the school, deposited your son, and exited. There it was, still on the ground face down, weeping, being stepped over and around. You were still given pause -- your conscience, if not your feet; perhaps your consciousness -- but the other parents were unconcerned as they entered and exited, so perhaps your concern was foolish. It probably just wanted attention, and you didn't want to ruin its life and undermine its parents by giving it

unwarranted attention, rewarding its weeping, and you still had to be and perhaps were in a different place with your daughter at the same time, besides being at home, reading, with neither. Then as the crossing guards raised their flags for you to safely cross the street through traffic, the child rose from its grave like it was Easter Sunday -- it wasn't, it was a school day, in winter no less -- and attached itself to an exiting mother on a cell phone. Did you make the right choice this morning? What did you learn from this experience? Knowing that, What are you going to do?

You do nothing forever about the scream and go to 195
You will do something eventually about the scream, but
you need quiet time to think, which you take to 12.

20.

Something holds you back from calling the cops. You're the kind of person who defies authority and expectation, which makes your life more interesting and more difficult. When told what to do, such as pick up your dog poop or change your clothes on a regular basis or tell age-appropriate stories or don't eat butter with a spoon or get a job, you are more likely to not do it. You should call the cops, but you don't feel like it. Some would call you lazy and irresponsible, others self-actualizing and irrepressible. Some have called you insipid, a few inspired. Some call you an ingrate, none call you great. But in sum, not a great many people call you. This may be because you never call anybody.

If you really must call someone, there are better people to call than the cops. Friendlier people. Not your mother, who is not friendly, not the prostitute, whom you have to pay for friendliness, and not your wife, of whose existence you know nothing but who must be friendly on occasion if you have children. Better conversationalists. Again, not your mother, whose conversational mastery is one reason you never call, and not your prostitute, whose conversational indifference is why you stay in touch, and not your wife, whom you don't know, which always makes for awkward conversation. Not that calling would have anything to do with wanting to converse, not that calling would mean you want to call, not that you have a calling. But you have this phone. You also have neighbors begging to be used. Or you had neighbors. You might only have a neighbor now. You could call and find out.

By calling your neighbor, you might reduce the possibility of seeing your neighbor face-to-face in the near future. You would not necessarily reduce the possibility of seeing your neighbor's lifeless face yet clinging starfish-like to his or her disembodied head, since said neighbor would be unlikely to answer the phone, which would perhaps finally entice you into investigating, unless you are

one of those steadfast people who do what they say they're going to do, with honor, without fail, regardless of the consequences, whatever it was they said, and leave the action to the cops as part of your social contract, which you may have said. But if said neighbor answers the phone, perhaps no follow up facetime will be required of you. If you call your neighbor, you may also avoid the responsibility of calling the cops. One of them might do the cop-calling -- don't forget you may still have more than one neighbor. If both answer and say everything is fine, which it surely is, it always is, perhaps calling the cops would be excessive. What if one says, Everything is fine, and the other says, Everything is not fine? Do they cancel each other? If you add a fine and a not fine together, what are you left with? Or what if one of them popped a vocal cord screaming and is unable to speak but able to answer the phone, in which case you'd hear only heavy breathing on the other end, which is fine during certain phone calls, but given present circumstances would be disconcerting. You could ask them what happened and they could not answer. What if one of them starts spouting endless "what if" scenarios at you? What if the "what if" scenarios are a distraction? They could have caused the scream instead of doing the screaming or receiving the scream, like you, and trick you via convoluted and sophisticated misdirection. But you could ask them directly, Were you the cause, effect, or witness? And you could receive an honest answer. After all, you will have opened the lines of communication.

The thing about calling the cops is it always leaves you unsatisfied. And you're not that into being unsatisfied. If you could pay more and be guaranteed satisfaction, you would pay more, but if there is one thing the prostitutes have taught you, it is that paying more is no guarantee of more satisfaction. Or maybe if they've taught you one thing it is the opposite, that quality is directly linearly related to cost. But you, living in your first-world country, have little-to-no experience bribing police officers. You could always call them later, after calling your neighbors, if it proves necessary to drag them into this minor neighborhood disturbance, a problem your community should be able to solve together. But if you're going to always call them later, perhaps you should call them now and get it over with. If you called them and asked if you should call them, they would say, Yes. You could email the police and ask, When's the best time to call? They might or might not email you back. Certainly, in your experience, more people don't email you back than do. As it is, this is one of those either/or choices, either you call them or you don't, which soothes you in its simplicity because there aren't many choices with only two options. You'd be even more soothed if there were only one option. Nevertheless you feel at peace with your prospects though your patience with yourself is wearing thin. This shouldn't be difficult:

you heard a scream and you have a phone and you don't like to talk on the phone for the love of God, just choose goddamnit.

Either you call your East Neighbor at 127.
Or you call your West Neighbor at 57.
Or you call the cops at 88.
Or you choose to call no one at 11.
Or you sit vacuously not choosing and not doing. Go to 11.

21.

While watching your sidekick-come-suspect-come-victim-come-culprit-come-informer-come-state's-evidence-come-sacrificial-lamb-come-sidekick cross his yard and enter the front door of his house, followed at the heels by a gliding shadow that stretches and shortens and undulates over surfaces, giving you goosebumps and reminding you of the decompositional role of maggots as it passes over you (Do you hear screams on the spring breeze?), followed close behind by the limping, mangy neighborhood mutt on his last legs, his hackles up, a sausage link and a growl dangling from his mouth, followed shortly thereafter by the shuffling octogenarian East Neighbor of your sidekick wearing your sidekick's wool in the sun and supporting himself with the walking stick your sidekick irresponsibly lost (Did you salvage the oversized magnifying glass as an attractive uterine art piece for the ambulance?), despite which he obviously crawled a great distance, note the knees of his pants worn away, the abrasions and bruises beneath, the dirt worked into the hands, the calluses like foot soles on his palms, who gives you a salutatory nod in passing but is intent on catching his dog, the dog who mercifully does not have much more get-up-and-go to him than this old man who always tipped scantily but, you admit, always paid in full and never expected more than pizza from you and who was regular, who could be depended on to order a sausage pizza every Friday night, something stable in the unreliable world, you decide once you close the book on this case and turn your evidence and your testimony and your uncertain sidekick in to higher authorities, you'll add another tear tattoo to your cascade. Maybe there's space at your ankle, or the arch of your foot, or maybe it's time to start a trickle down the other leg. Time for a tear. For needle and ink. Another year gone. Another case closed, another mystery solved, another evil apprehended. The world a better place. Another tear, another year. You want the ankle because it'll hurt more on the bone. Sunshine and flowers and pollen and bees and flies and tears and crimes solved and questions answered and needle and ink. It is spring again. Solving the mystery has been satisfying. But tomorrow back to pizza and the

harping of your sidekick's mother. My fuck, can you do that? There will be another investigation, there always is, another heinous mystery, but they don't get you off like they used to. Is a post-story tear all that's left you? Are tears and ennui and words that make you cringe, words with more vowels than consonants, words probably of fucking French origin, all that you have to look forward to? You sigh and hitch up your skirt, it's time you guess to wrap this up, no more versions of your victim closely related enough to him to be incriminated are coming, no one else chases the scream, you'll be the last character to go in, you think, when the scream screams out of the house and knocks you to the ground. You can't think. Then you can. The scream, authored by your sidekick, his scream. That was a scream worth investigating, worth explaining. It's gone. Was that the scream he heard? His own pre-emptive scream? A kind of foreshadow? What of his wife and children, are they dead, or was that a foreshadow too, a kind of nostalgic perception of the fact that one day they will die and be lost to him, a pre-lament that gained traction in his world, substance, reality? Were they invented to justify the scream or did he slaughter them? Does it matter. He's dead, you're pretty sure, based on your experience with the blooming of absences. Did he behead Medusa. Did he trap the Grim Reaper guy in the handheld suicide device. The memory of him reminds you of the shadow that stole into the house and is not there as you enter and find the dog and the old man embracing, the man in the chair now a film of dust and a dark stain on the chair, the leftover crusts of the pizza you delivered desiccated into rocks, your sidekick-victim-victimizer on the floor dead from blunt pulmonary trauma assisted by frontal lobe penetration through the mouth by two digits and their subsequent whisking. Suicide is the most likely motive considering what he may have endured in the past, present, and future, but you've tried to lobotomize yourself before and it is not easy. Though you've never experimented with screaming yourself to death. The scream. A scream of beginnings and endings. Do you close the case or reopen it?

-- Did you do this? you inquire of the old man.

-- What? he says.

You don't repeat yourself. You asked a question you knew the answer to. You're not going to arrest the old man no matter how closely related he is to the victim-victimizer, no matter if he is him, no matter if he created him, no matter if he lives next door and is the last man standing. He has so little left to live and he's so unaware of the consequences of the action he may or may not have committed and it was all so long ago. This is not a man who slaughtered his family, and if he did he did not mean to. This is a man who should be fishing and embracing his dog.

-- He sacrificed himself for you, you say to the old man. He tortured himself so you and the dog could share your love without fear of its insignificance. He chose to scream so you don't have to.

-- What did you say? the old man inquires.

You* love him briefly for not understanding you, for not hearing your pap, for being an old man, for hearing the same scream you heard but only half-hearing it, for being here with you during spring, for loving the dog. He dies shortly after you love him, he was already 99.9% to 2, but in the moment you love him he infects you and you bear his children, twins at least, probably more. Quit the pizza girl gig and quit detectiving as a profession even if you keep it a habit or hobby or distraction. You don't have time while raising children, inking tears, no time to answer questions but your own quandary of daily logistics, no time to dig into mysteries. You find life more satisfying that way, with no time, with the two neighboring houses on either side connected to yours by newly-constructed passages, living off the old man's contented endowment with his dog who won't die until the children are young despite his blind incontinence, off the victim's largesse of torment and the victimizer's estate of doubt, doing what needs done, aging, raising your progeny. Raising with no time for reflection, or with not much. You bury your repugnant dalliances with what's the point arrived at in moments of weakness and weariness. Because if you're not going to engender life, what the fuck, it was spring and he was so old and you so unprotected, wanting to feel something, everything, anything, and so you added more life to your life, both enjoyment and pain, reason and absurdity, understanding and doubt, life and non-life. These bundled possibilities are why you continue. It's not math or a labyrinth or a journey or an investigation but a yelp, a cry, a song, an enduring or oft-repeated scream, a negation of or justification of or a marching to, a procession to the 2 you visit eventually, a life you voice.

22.

The handkerchief is empty and one of the others inserts the eyeball. You don't see which. You stare into the empty gray wrinkled handkerchief you hold, a flap of gray in a gray world, a square piece of nothing landscape. They see you peck you raise welts scream beat you with their wings take flight. Swirling soaring trumpeting gray flecks swallowed by gray sky. You have chosen poorly. Perhaps you confused stage left with audience left. You have no point of reference in the gray nowhere, where you will languish forever. Or you have the good fortune to exist in a world where you can go back and choose again, an opportunity that never or next to never presents itself in other worlds. Which gives you the

chance to languish in the Labyrinth forever as one should languish in a labyrinth forever: wandering, searching, desperate, wasting away rather than stationary, rooted, surrendering to inescapability, finding peace in the gray. You hope you appreciate it. Now to find or remember or return where you were.

23.

You lurch through the doorway and the scream stops and you fear that what Y chased killed him. Perhaps, no, yes, this scream was the scream but you had stopped looking for it, you only half heard it, you don't think you missed much, you don't want it anymore, and did the scream kill your potential canine companion or was the scream your love dying? The inside of what was your house is the same, the glass the chair the ants, but reeks of death. Y growls at the wall. Relief. The dead one is you. There are two dead yous here, one you how you used to be, in the chair under the blanket but without eyelids and without an ear and without five fingers and putrefied, mostly decomposed, and another you crumpled on the ground with two holes yet draining blood under the chin and a fresh cylindrical cavity stamped into your chest. If the death was yours, are you bequeathed a new life with a dog? Fall to your knees before him as he growls and bears his teeth and looks for something to fight, to kill, to devour, defending his corpses, your corpses, against trespass. Throw him your old headless hen as an offering. He sniffs, dismisses, growls at you. Throw the stick. He does not watch it go; he growls. Shut your eye and open your arms and call Y, Y, Come Y, and let him lay his judgment on you, the teeth or the tongue. Wait. Feel his paws on your shoulders and his dog breath in your nose. Embrace him. Yes, he comes when you call him, hobbles into your arms, and yes, licks your face like an ice cream cone or his balls. While you are licked and loved, the pizza girl enters without ringing the bell. From your kneeling vantage of canine affection, see up the pizza girl's no skirt to speak of and confirm that what in your imagination was no underwear is in reality no underwear. She snaps her fingers and the dog slinks aside and she takes Y's place or you shove away Y and pull her down onto your lap or Y nips at her heels and herds her into your arms or there is a transition from loving the dog Y to loving the woman Viola that is natural and arousing and not abrupt or absurd. She is interested in you, and you her. She feels good in your arms. Viola, she mouths or states flatly or proclaims her name as if she doesn't remember you. Remember how she delivered your pizza. Remember how her lip stud fit into the lip hole that your East Neighbor bequeathed you before you became him. In your old age, Viola says something you cannot hear that doesn't matter. The dog lies by, watchful, there and not there, observing your last human act without intrusion. You are dying, but she

comes to you, takes you, comes into you, you into her, you becoming in her, beginning in her, finally, so late and you so finished. She gives you your happy ending at 2. Since the moment is mutual or profound or twisted, you may get a sense of her experience of the happy ending beginning at "You*" in the last paragraph of 21. You and not you mixes with her and not her and takes life without your consciousness but with its own. It lives in the world, its world, a world. After much sound and silence, its consciousness also ends at 2.

24.

Go to 32.

25.

Invigorated by the scream, you stagger for its origin in the rearmost room of the house but the scream is already dying, wheezing out a punctured lung on the floor as your prey extricates his stub from the scream's chest cavity and his hand from the scream's mouth through the soft spot under the chin. Too late you snarl and bear your fangs and lunge and snap. The menace deflects you with its staff and as you gather yourself for another charge -- you will fight to the death -- you see in your enemy's face neither engagement in this dogfight nor pride nor disappointment nor relief nor disgust nor satisfaction in his recent conquest. You see a search. You see a lack of presence. You see absence. He is already not here. He doesn't watch you scrabble to your paws. He walks away. Before you can leap again he passes through a solid wall. You've chased him off you suppose, but you could not stop him from killing the man of the house, a potential master. You failed. You lick the dead man on the ground, then the much colder, deader man smelling of early putrefaction in the chair, whom the dead man on the ground must have killed long ago and saved as an ornament or toy or winter's sustenance. Like a buried bone. The licking doesn't help. Your escaped prey, your failed defense, your antagonist's disengagement lingers. You have not aided humanity or helped men or made life more livable for a man. You have not found anyone to care for you in your old age as your hips fail, as you go blind and incontinent, no one to cook you scrambled eggs and ground beef. Another man shuffles through the door. A man who resembles the one on the floor but alive and much older, who resembles the man in the chair but with eyelids and two ears and ten fingers, who resemble your lost prey in that he is blind in one eye but who smells much better or worse. A man whose outdoor scent resembles your first owner, almost forgotten, a man who called you Y, which is what this man calls you, Y, longingly, lovingly, overjoyed to see you, even if he also carries the shut-in scent of your first owner's neighbor, who threw rocks at you

and whose yard you shat in and whose corpses you've recently licked to no effect, in addition to a hint of the orange aroma of your first owner's wife, who you suppose cared for you indirectly. He throws you an old withered headless chicken as if the abundance of the two corpses of your old nemesis neighbor whose chickens and eggs you'd eat at will weren't behind you. He throws you a stick too large to fetch, as if you ever had use for fetch. He relearns or reacquaints himself or reminds what relationship is. He opens his arms. You lurch into him and lick his face and surrender the ambition that you thoroughly failed to achieve, to do good for humanity, except now you find and receive and give and make love for a man. You quench your consciousness in him. You go blind and give yourself to being his dog, Y, loving him even as he loves another until he goes promptly to 2 and you become another's dog, another to whom you sacrifice yourself, his brief lover, forgetting this old man to whose offspring you devote yourself wholeheartedly until you go to 2.

26.

Not very good at Russian roulette, you go to 195.

27.

You are before you, dead in your Lay-Z-Boy, tortured and all the other bullshit you've said over and over, beaten endlessly, eyelids and ear and fingers removed. You unplug yourself for the last time, listen to the compression cuffs cease to hiss, distrust your feeling that you've committed this act before and are living in a strange loop, that you are a strange loop, and gaze blankly upon you without observation or mental process or more ors because you're sick of you. You've done this to yourself, this defiling and exposition, and you can bring yourself to do no more. If you want to observe yourself again, go back to the middle of 115, get out of here, there you are, still, or, more ors, if you want to be someone else, who is also yourself, go to 11 for example and choose differently, scram, choose to stay in and suffer what you began rather than slink like a coward into the night without consequences for your screams, beat it, or return to when you exited your house and turn a different direction, discover how/if that changes your life, you figure out where that is, where all those forks are, enough hand holding, until you end again, and end again, and end again, always where you are, always alone with you. Or perhaps, as these are your last moments of freedom before you are caught, sentenced, and executed, you'd prefer, instead of striving to change what you are or flailing to become another you, to spend one of your final choices cherishing what is important to you that you are about to lose or are losing or have lost, open sky or wool or pizza or

your children if you had them for example. Thinking of the possibilities or actualities of them is hypothetically much more torturous than eating your ear or cutting off your fingers. Longing for your non-existent children is the only meaningful non-action left to you. Inaction is the only action left you. To wait and love is all that's left of you. You toss the empty pizza box to the ground and examine the drawings intermingled with your papers and notes and scrawls on your desk. The ovoid heads, the alien faces, the circular bodies, the stick appendages. The orcas eating fish in negative, the remainder of the paper inked blue. A stock family in front of a square house. The random I-love-you-Dad's. The turtles. The good knights impaling bad knights on lances atop big castles with turrets and drawbridges and portcullises drawn finer than you are capable. The copying of your words without comprehension. The fearsome dragons. The distressed treasure map. The long string of letters and the small voice telling you the word it spells. The creations are here but the artists are not. You are desperate to be with them, or be them, somewhere else, somewhere where they are chortling and quarreling and screaming at each other and hugging you and playing dress up and princess and superhero and dinosaur and seal pup and killing and saving one another, but that is impossible even if they are doing so in another place with another you, there is another world but it is in this one, you cannot go there, it is beyond the reach of your words, and the impossibility, the frustration, the emptiness, causes a whine, a whimper, a scream to build in your voicebox as the door opens -- Thank God, you think, Viola, to sex you and unsex you, to obliterate your self-awareness, to arrest you and free you from freedom of thought and read you your rights and save you from yourself, but no, a character walks in who can be no one but Death, an idea you jotted in black on a post-it note and starred, Death, a gleam in your eye, a word buried in a rubble of paper and pizza crusts and daily doings, one-handed, one-eyed, deaf, mute, carrying a curved staff, you weren't feeling original that day, in a dark cloak or robe or cape or trench coat, tongueless. He comes for you, or for your scream. You are your scream. He drives his index and middle finger up under your chin through the soft flesh between your jawbones, through your mouth, through your pallet, and into your brain behind your eyeballs, lifting you off the ground and wriggling the two fingers in your frontal lobe, freeing you from what you've done, mercifully ending your story with your love for your possible children, sparing you further choices of what and how to think, farther synaptic connections, plunging his stub into your chest cavity, sending you to either another world or the nowhere of 2.

Go to 192.

29.

You can't escape it, you can't get away from yourself, after all the miles and all the years you're still lovelorn, chasing away emptiness, chasing a dog under the cover of chasing a scream. You chase the dog, which must itself be chasing something else, person or animal or smell or memory, without losing or gaining ground, without hearing in one ear and without sight in one eye. As you crawl, you have time to think, which you're not happy about because one of the points of the chase is self-silence. Dizzy, right-half of your head aching, infected, you have a self-realization. You realize, discover, determine, calculate, deduce, prove, decide that you have come to resemble your ex-East Neighbor so completely that you chase his dog, seek his dog's love; you are an echo of your long dead East Neighbor. Perhaps it was indeed he who screamed and would not admit it or was not aware of his emissions. Perhaps he screamed you. You are a reverberation of him, not an exact replica, slightly distorted, attenuated, dampened, imperfectly reflected off your own surface. Are you a near enough reflection that his dog, half bloodhound, half terrier, who has surely endured his own misfortune through the years on his lonely forlorn hunt, on his homeward trajectory, will accept you as your East Neighbor and be yours? Have you endured a similar quantity of fruitless questing as he? You never saw your East Neighbor crawl. Do you smell of the outdoors confined, do you carry the scent of his wife, have you disappointed your children equally, can Y love you as he loved him, no, you have no appetite for a competition -- can Y love you some? You don't know, but it's the hope that keeps you going now that you're so changed in appearance and character that your wife and children if you had them if they're alive would not recognize you if they wanted to, which they wouldn't; you abandoned them to ostensibly chase a scream, a sound, an auditory sensation of unknown provenance and description and existence, the holler of nirvana, the shriek of hell, the twitter of transcendence, the siren of suffering, the scream of death and birth and pain and overcoming and fear and ecstasy and frustration and wild laughter. Half of which you suddenly realize you can gradually hear like a background hum as you track Y into your old neighborhood so unchanged, a bit beat up and run down maybe but with the same aspirations in the lawns and the same failures in the gardens and the same striving in the siding and the same conformities in the architecture. The pain in your right ear is forgotten or numbed or healed; hearing has not returned. You stand and walk with the aid of the stick that you fetched for Y. The anxiety and nausea and disequilibrium are gone. You are home. No teary welcoming party awaits you with open arms. No

red-faced mob questions your whereabouts. No wife. No one is here for you except Y. You follow him into your front yard, now your West Neighbor's front yard if you are your East Neighbor, and hesitate because are you?, and if you are are you trespassing?, but your need to be loved overrides your doubt and you hobble through sunshine and pollen and the clucking progeny of your chickens, lugging one of their headless ancestors, past bushes of yellow and pink and purple and the pizza girl scantily clad leaning on an ambulance among twitterpating birds, up to the open front door, into which disappeared Y, within which is 23, and from which blasts a scream.

30.

You cannot stomach more desperation. You accept the slot's arduous narrowness, the inconvenience of stepping sideways over and over, the exertion required to overcome the friction between you and the smooth walls which though polished to a low coefficient of friction by the passage of innumerable bodies squeeze with an unrelenting normal force. You squirm leisurely, no slower than you want, not hyperventilating, not claustrophobic, satisfying your oxygen requirements. If water, calories, and stimuli are scarce or nonexistent, it is no matter. You will arrive when you arrive, no sooner, no matter how long it takes, no matter your hunger. You distance yourself from the hunger, separate yourself from your stomach, detach your gut, disembowel yourself and let the organ drag behind you like the gorgon head but by your intestines rather than dreadlocks. You accept that life is suffering. You are sufficient within yourself. You are detachment, feeling no pain, no desire, no nothing. Quelled, your body does the work without you. This works for a long time. You are content. Or detached absent not here. One day you detect you've stopped moving. Your body has bled its ambition for motion or swallowed its musculature of survival step-by-step or breath-by-breath shed like drops of blood or bread crumbs. Your remaining fuel is apathy. In a state of apathy you atrophy. Are you willing to die here, content? You persevere on your question. No, unattached to your thoughts, incapable of thought, you don't think. You dwell on it. You dwell in it. You dwell. Feeling no need to answer the question, you remain. Immobile. Selfless. The emptinesses inside squeezed shut in terminal embrace. Finally once before the end you are whole. You want nothing. The slot squeezes. Does the squeeze increase or develop direction and overcome your unspoken resistance or unconscious will or is its squeeze unchanging but your sensation of the squeeze increases or has your final complete surrender of control desire will made you become it? You don't move of your own volition. You are pushed slightly forward and you sense light. You can't help it, you don't want it, you are pushed

into your body through your apathy incorporated ahead in the narrowing. You open your mouth to scream. You can't breathe liquid fills your mouth pushed again. You don't want to go. You want to stay and die. Held tight and crushed. The light is nearer but the passage is insufficiently dilated, 9.8 centimeters, your skull is bending, deforming, remolding into a cone, you don't want to, still the pushing, squeezing, will your brains squirt out the back of your head or your ear or will the walls tear and bleed and the pushing cease and you be unevicted and permitted to suffocate?, you don't want to come, your head gripped by tongs and you pushed and dragged, arms pinned to sides without freedom of movement, forced to move, pushed and dragged not screaming out of the slot or passage or tunnel and now screaming flailing appendages wild, your stomach and extra head trailing plopping to floor, afterbirth, the slot convulsing, quaking, crying, relaxing, closing. In the meager torchlight of this larger cavity, you want. You face a choice as if your first. Which arm leading off this vacuous cold hard room in cardinal directions will hold you tight and keep you warm?

If the north, slip forever through the arm to 142.
If the east, wither forever in the arm to 114.
If the south, wriggle twice forever into the arms of 178.

31.

What looks like a man but smells far worse or better, what is ripe when spoiled, who is alive when dead, whose pace does not relent, who lacks a hand and an eye and voices an occasional inadvertent incomprehensible guttural grunt, whose staff is unbreakable, who does not evacuate or expel, who does not give a shit about you? You chase something wretched in a biped's body over hill and through vale under open sky. You've closed to within earshot. It makes no noise. It is a thing to inspire screams in men, women, and children. Dogs do not scream. A thing you are drawn to like a fresh corpse though it isn't fresh or a trespasser though this isn't your property or an adversary though it does not acknowledge and therefore cannot oppose your existence or a rat. Follow its scent, hungry as you are. Don't lose it. Be of service, be welcomed home, perform a trick in return for a master, in return for a pet, in return for scraps, break a vermin's neck for a treat, starve, fill the vacancy inside, the loneliness of a lone pack animal, with the hope of the satisfaction of an absent companion of another species. Obey the master in your brain. Hunt your prey. Follow him home. Trail him into a vast wide flat city, through gridlocked streets and a flood of cars and braying horns and dogs straining at leashes to confront you and sniff your balls and fight for dominance and others barking wildly and snarling and whimpering behind fences at the thing housed in a man's body which you follow

through back alleys and dive bars and flop houses and cul-de-sacs and hobo-lined parks and soup kitchens and antiseptic hospitals and impenetrable thorn-studded blackberry bramble and vacant lots filled with trash heaps in a straight-line, unwaveringly straight across street intersections and interstate interchanges, under underpasses and through tent cities into the suburbs, the gated green communities of invisible fences, the ungated subdivisions of repeated identical houses, and into the yard next door to your onetime owner long lost, the yard you used to shit in and claim as your own with your piss, the chickens squawking at your prey more than they ever did you even though you ate their eggs and you're a dog. Spring ends at your neighbor's property line. The thing plows a straight path through the snow to the neighbor's front door. There he hesitates. Here is your chance. You close the gap and enter the snow laden yard but between you and he are four fingers and a thumb decomposed beyond all scent lying in a bare patch of damp green grass arranged as if they were still attached to a common hand, as if they were tossed out a window in the dead of winter like compost and melted a handprint in the snow, and you are so very hungry. You snarf or gulp or swallow them. Meager sustenance, it doesn't take long. But in the interim the thing pushes open the front door of the house of your master's neighbor with his staff though the door was shut and you can only imagine and are curiously certain locked and enters. Why?, you wonder, no, you're a dog. You don't care for your master's neighbor but he is a man and there is danger in your neighborhood and you must drive it off or kill it or die trying. You acquire motion again, accelerating, powered by decomposed fingers in your stomach, limping up the steps if there are steps at double pace, no time for chasing chickens or to pee a scent alerting all of your long-awaited return to reclaim what is yours. You push the door to 25 open with your nose, for what you chase did not latch it behind him, and are immediately assaulted by a smell of blood and the rising high-frequency whine, yet inaudible to the human ear, of an incipient scream.

32.

You call and order a pizza.

-- Whaddya want on it?

-- You decide.

The pizza girl hangs up. You're not sure if you ordered a pizza or not. You could call back and order a pizza, but will you then be ordering another pizza? You don't want pizza after pizza appearing on your doorstep.

You gave your decision to the pizza girl, you think. You'll have to have a little faith that she'll make your decision responsibly. And that she'll make your

pizza well. Whatever she chooses you'll chew. No, you think, not quite clever enough to be worth the thought. Whatever she'll choose you'll chew. Closer, but no, only a slice of symmetry will justify your psychological expenditure. In the future you will note that what you chewed, she chose. You're further from beauty with each word choice. The inability to attain harmony is frustrating, but you understand frustration is an unavoidable obstacle and necessary tool when one seeks a solution.

From your frustration, rising like dough in the oven's maw, an epiphany: the problem is the second person, the subjects of the verbs. How to conjugate. You must switch what you and she do. She chews what you choose. A glimpse of light, a yelp, an inaccurately reflected meaning you disregard because there is such a dearth of beauty love joy in the world that you clutch to the untruth you created like a baby howler monkey to its screaming mother's belly, concise and active and direct and clear and symmetrical and arousing -- She chews what you choose.

The moment passes. Your sentence has been thought. It has been written. It has been read. By you, if nobody else. Twice. We all know repetition is not as stimulating as an original experience; repetition nullifies the uniqueness of an experience; perfect repetition is impossible, which is related to the first and second things we know about repetition. Though we also know how clumsy, painful, and unenjoyable the virgin experience can be, while practice makes perfect, as you like to say. Or, as you also like to say, Familiarity breeds ..., well, Familiarity breeds. Your joy dwindles to pleasure and fades into memory, which, like an opiate, is less stimulating each time you use it, just as the word stimulate attenuates with every repetition.

There is a chance the pizza girl will choose toppings not to your liking, toppings that will detract from your enjoyment of the pizza. But you're amenable when it comes to pizza toppings, meat, veggies, whatever, even fruit if you're feeling freaky, and she is experienced, and the prospect of opening the pizza box upon a novel pizza variety which you've never before eaten, did not order, and could not conceive is stimulating, or invigorating, or enlivening. The possibility keeps you going. That and the scream. Besides, it's her choice, so it's not your fault if you don't like it.

You sigh. You wonder briefly if a sigh and a scream could share the same cause. Certainly they are different species of human sounds, but are they not in the same kingdom of emission, the order of expression, the family of exhalation? And aren't they both within the genus of the wordless, the ineffable, the ambiguously motivated? You sighed because you were satisfied, you suppose, what with having abdicated responsibility for your own happiness, or rather as

satisfied as you could be. But could this same feeling have caused a scream in another? Instead of sighing, why did you not scream? Could you?

You won't be rushed. You won't chase the scream into a logic puzzle quite yet. You are a little too satisfied yet. You are a little too yet. You'll wait until you want it more. You settle into your surroundings and wait for your pizza, which already feels long in coming. The neighborhood is quiet, which you enjoy, certainly more than when the neighborhood is screaming. Though when your neighborhood screams, it often means your neighborhood is full of children, and you're no curmudgeon; you love living in a neighborhood teeming with sprites. Your house is also quiet, which you also enjoy. Does this mean that your house is not always, quiet? To pick the frayed thread of one of your previous thoughts, You know you cannot enjoy something you experience continuously, incessantly, without end. You've never been one for tantric sex or epic novels or weeklong benders or a daily regiment of pills or unmitigated happiness. There is a reason, you've always believed, for hangovers, indigestion, ennui, pain, timeouts, exhaustion, depression, and death. And so, you reason, if you enjoy the current quietude of your house, it must not always have been quiet. What then was the previous tumult, which you may or may not have enjoyed, and what caused it to cease?

For one, prior to this quiet a scream filled your house. And prior to the scream

Careful, you remonstrate yourself. You are relaxing, resting, mustering the energy for the argument with which you'll tame the scrum scream, the mental powers for the caress with which you will coerce the enervated scream, the stamina of thought which will articulate the hand with which you will cup the sopping scream – you cannot decide the truest way to phrase it because there's a finger of truth in each, if there is truth. Despite your privations of clarity, you won't be tempted prematurely by the scream's sensuality. You have all night, all the time in your world. You will wait for your novel pizza and, with its post-contemporary toppings to sustain you, pursue the scream reasonably. You wait in your chair. Your chair is comfortable. It conforms to you. It is dented by your presence. When you are not here your dent remains. You are here. You feel a logic coming on and castigate yourself, You are not working, You are relaxing, and If your mind must work or else curdle in stasis then let it for now solely observe and save its logic for the appropriate adversary or accomplice or amor. You wear slippers. The slippers stink. Your feet within them therefore stink. Caution, you tell yourself. The slippers stink and are worn around the toes and soles. The slippers are old. Take a deep breath, you say quietly. The slippers are of the kind made to look like Indian-or-Native-or-First American moccasins –

you curse your inability to specify tribe, clan, family, nation – though they are not made of deer hide but a buckskin-looking plastic and are lined with plastic fleece and soled in plastic. You, you who prefer, no, love natural materials, wool and skin chief among them, wear this contemporary knockoff, a cheap imitation, a post-modern acquisition of an image from a people your ancestors decimated and slaughtered and lived with and cheated and sexed and diseased and had no respect for and inadvertently and advertently essentially eradicated with all their unknown pleasures and pains and simplicities and complexities and ignorance and understanding, a moccasin as if cut off an Indian – a title giving insight into how and when and where you were raised – with the Indian's gnarled, callused foot still in it. Now your foot in it. Your soft foot is elevated and, as far as you can deduce, has been unused for some time despite the wear and stink and age of your slippers. By saying foot you do not imply that you have only one foot. You've gone singular to allow for the universal. What happened to the Indian foot that was in the moccasin? Could it be, despite your awareness of the plastic artifice of the moccasin, that by wearing it you become part Indian? And could it also be, simultaneously, by participating in the perpetuation of the capitalizing chicanery of the appropriated moccasin imagery, that you become part genocidal ancestor? Is not what you wear a modern day moccasin? Do you not wish you were an Indian – you can't help it, how you were raised, a lack of spirit, romantic iconography, mythic deficit, etc. – to give you a definition, a purpose, a heritage you lack, to replace your modern rootless emptiness with the emptiness of a heritage pillaged and a purpose antiquated and a definition obsolete, one with the grandfathers and spirits and animals and Earth, though you imagine an Indian – now you're lumping them all together you racist – feels differently, like no one, isolated, singular, inessential. You cannot be an Indian unless you are one. You'll never feel what one feels, how these corruptions and generalizations of what it is to be an Indian makes one feel – objectified at the moment – except that Indians feel as many individual feelings as anybody and so perhaps at some point your feelings have aligned or are aligning or will align with an Indian's. Perhaps you both feel the same. Still, that's different than being an Indian, isn't it? You're not an Indian, are you? By wearing these old non-moccasin slippers you are trying to be an untruth, a thing that does not exist. Or else somebody gave you these slippers as a gift, a loving wife or girlfriend or lover, a hugging child, a friendly neighbor, and you're not trying to be anything, you just are. You are wearing them. Could you choose not to? Not to wear them, not to be anything? Would it hurt his or her, the giver's, feelings? Or were you given the slippers by an enemy trying to frame you with circumstantial evidence of your character, to set you up as a covetous man, an empty man, a man, a man who

wants to be what he is not, who wants to be what it is impossible to be, an enemy framing you, an enemy who wants us to think you fabricate a fictitious enemy who frames you, an enemy who wants us to believe you are the kind of person who could have caused another person to scream the scream.

You slap your wrist to stop. You exercise willpower. You are not subject to your desires, you can resist temptation, you possess free will, you are more than your need for logic and explanation and motivation and rising action and narrative complication and tension and resolution. You may not be more than your need for love, but all in due time. Let the scream come to you. Relax, you tell yourself. Release to gain control. Breathe deep. Exhale the negative energy. Your thoughts slip off you like water off a chicken's back, like water off the plastic corrugated roof you installed on your chicken coop so many years ago, like water off the back or buttocks or breasts of the wife you may or may not have in a thunderstorm on a summer night – no, your thoughts slip off you like ... no. Your thoughts go. They dissipate. They cease. Release. You meditate, inhale, dawn, awareness descending, epiphany – no no no. Your awareness observes, eyes closed, your surroundings: reclined Lay-Z-Boy you dent; feet up and ensconced in stinky moccasin-like slippers; hairy hands resting on your belly, fingers entwined to form a cage from which the head of a pen protrudes; compression cuffs of the kind nurses wrap around calves to promote circulation in bedbound patients and mitigate amputation wrapped around your calves and pulsing; wrapped around your collective legs already wrapped individually in the pulsing cuffs, a gray, moth-eaten, wool blanket of World War II government surplus vintage. The blanket from your father then, or grandfather, or great-grandfather, or Salvation Army, or else you married into it. This is your blanket, your favorite blanket, your blankie if you are young at heart, and the warmth and comfort – not to the skin, which itches in contact with the blanket – and love it gives you without question is why you have held onto it for so long, why you cannot be parted with it, why you have allowed it to hold you, why you do not smell it or see its shabbiness or hear your wife's scorn if you have one. Your eyes are closed. You cannot see if underneath the blanket you wear pants. Your legs do not itch, so perhaps you wear pants. Though you may have lost all sensation below the waist – can you feel the cuffs circulating your blood or do you only think you can? Don't figure it out. You'll go blind going on like this, it's okay to not know if you are or are not wearing pants. You wear a light gray sweatshirt from a past life when you played softball or fought forest fires or donated your time to build subsidized housing or participated in some activity of comradery, of working together to a common end, of enduring hardship with others and thereby creating community. Shhh, you hush yourself, the gray of the

sweatshirt is lighter than that of the blanket and more forgiving on your skin, if similarly stained and thoroughly worn. An end table to the right of you with a mug of coffee or glass of water or glass of wine or milk or beer or a bottle of whiskey or pills or an empty bottle to spit in or an ashtray for cigarettes or your tobacco pipe or marijuana pipe or crack pipe or cup of tea – you decide for us, it's your end table – an end table without food and without a clock. To the left of you is a desk smothered with papers, a moleskin journal like Picasso used before his molecules were repurposed, a spiral notebook like you used as a kid before you matured and bought more expensive notebooks for your mature thoughts, post-it notes fluttering like monarch butterflies, pens ranging the color spectrum from high frequency to low, uninterpretable flowcharts, indecipherable causality, illegitimate handwriting, bad ideas, unoriginal insights, nonsensical color coding, a boring chronology, a poorly reasoned and philosophically illegible and exhibitionistic spread beckoning you to enter it on the desk. Save your escape into the rut for later. The room is narrow. The house is narrow. Your feet point south, to the front of the house. To your immediate east and west, beyond desk and end table, are windows. The end table, reclined easy chair with footrest extended, and desk consume the room's width. Behind you, to the north, stairs lead upstairs. Faraway to the south, through the kitchen and living room, is the front door. The house is deep. So deep you cannot visualize all the way to the front door. What you have observed with your mind's eye and described with your mind's mouth is a two-story, shotgun house, small for a family, whether or not you have one, no matter what might be upstairs, no personal space to speak of despite its depth, nowhere to escape to in spite of your apparent solitude. You are blind beyond the confines of your room, but that is fine. Here is where you are, not there. Be where you are, nowhere else; live fully; know the satisfaction of being present. You no longer long to lengthen your house or augment its height – the proximity of your neighbors makes an expansion of breadth not worth dwelling on. To expand out the back or add-on on top were once-upon-a-time longings for more space and all that space represents, longings perhaps in response to your claustrophobia undiagnosed by anyone but yourself, longings no longer because now you explore the expanses of your internal space. On the walls in this office someone has written red letters that don't make words and smeared a rainbow of handprints and drawn a menagerie of vividly colored bulbous many-legged creatures. There are perhaps toys on the floor, balls, objects with wheels, automatons that talk and sing and flush and stimulate, but you let their batteries die long ago and never replaced them and no longer acknowledge the silent husks of once rambunctious plastic because to do so would clutter your awareness with stuff, with plastic, with noise in the sanctuary

in which you will transcend or become the material world, detach from or satiate ineffable longings, and experience or be exonerated of unspeakable truths. From here you will eradicate the scream from your existence, and thereby improve the lot of humanity, once your pizza arrives.

There must be a phone, doesn't matter where, you ordered a pizza you think. Made other calls perhaps. Did you call your mother? Your maybe wife?

You feel good about yourself. Relaxed, energized. More than yourself. Content even. Not hungry. Rather than rush to lay your reason on the scream, rather than logic its cause, rather than capture it with your mind and extinguish it, you enjoy your rarity for a time. These opportunities to transcend the here and now by waiting are few and short-lived before the noise seizes you and confines you to what you can see and hear and touch, what you can see and hear and touch closing in on you, what you cannot see or hear or touch closing in on you, until you cannot move forward or back and you haven't the space to take a breath, trapped, the nausea, the irrational panic rising, or maybe it's rational, maybe you are stuck forever or until you die with nowhere to go, no escape, the walls pressing in and you unable to move your fists to beat them – you have been bottled, jarred, canned – and you screaming to no effect for no one can hear you. Instead of that, you allow yourself to expand internally for now. You don't eradicate the scream just yet.

You can eradicate the scream, you think. You have to think you can, you've donned eradicating the scream like a hat; a hat indicates who you are; you have to wear your hat or who will? A cowboy must wear a cowboy hat and believe he is a cowboy or he isn't. What kind of hat would an eradicator of screams wear? Wool? SWAT team helmet? What's the kind of hat that Sherlock Holmes wore when he was alive? A cap of invisibility? A death mask? By eradicating the scream you suspect you would be eradicating screams, the singular representative of the general, implying all screams, the personal representative of the universal, and you suppose the act of screaming, the concrete representative of the conceptual, since one cannot scream without a scream. Unless one screams silently, which is possible, but is perhaps something else, some unnamed expression, something for you to name then, an expression for you to discover, but one task at once you think or you'll be multitasking, which is against your here-and-now ethos. You cannot deny that once you eradicate the scream, which will represent the eradication of the act of screaming, there will still be innumerable other screams in the world at any given moment, because representation is a poor substitute for actuality. If something represents something then that something is by definition not that something. Your eradication of the scream, then, will be actual and symbolic, while your

eradication of screams will be merely symbolic, and you know how you feel about symbols. The real thing when available is always better, unless a surrogate is needed because the real thing is just too cumbersome, such as democracy and consolidating all screams into one. Or when the real thing is not present. The scream is gone, spatially speaking, you think, leaving nothing but your representation of it.

Another hitch in your diaphragm is that the very essence, perhaps the beauty if you are the type of person who expresses admiration for your enemies, of a scream is its self-eradication. The scream screamed itself out, for instance, is a sentence of which you're fond. A scream is akin to a praying mantis, which eats its mate after consummation, or those species of spiders who eat their mother, or the multifarious animals practicing infanticide, though not closely related kin. Perhaps like an undernourished hen eating its eggs?, you brainstorm. Like the salmon rotting in the streambed after spawning. Like a sensitive orchid with its erotic curves. Like any flower. Like a scorpion stinging itself with its tail, like a snake eating its tail, like a dog chasing its tail.

What you're getting at is, if you set out to do what a scream naturally does (eradicate itself, trail off, go silent) do you then become a scream?

Another way to look at it is will you engender, enable, or enact screams instead of eliminating them?

On the other hand, if you did eradicate screaming without eradicating the act of screaming, and thereby named and discovered (who does not desire to name and discover? whose existence does not lack justification?) a new facial expression: the silent scream (you'll come up with a catchier, more salable name later when you're brainstorming about your brand rather than the scream) (The Munch), how would your discovery be accepted? Would it be lauded? Become fashionable? Would everyone begin to wear silent scream faces? Around every corner, would the silent scream face greet you, perpetually reminding you of your expressive gift to humanity, your distressing accomplishment, your gutting of a scream's nature? Could you live with the possibility that your invention, the silent scream, could spread like a bioengineered crop become weed? Perhaps your advancement in scream technology removes the check-and-balance, the appalling sound, like humanity's mythical ageing gene, the trait that kept screams from running rampant, their unbearable sound, the trait that necessitated their dying, their unsustainable sound, the quality that fostered their production and cessation, their insufferably ethereal sound, and without their own sound to stop them the silent screams spread like antibiotic resistant bacteria and western economic culture and smartphones and social media and now the silent screams are on everyone's face, an unending silent nightmare with each person wearing

their silent scream on their face, provoking silent screams in all they encounter, the silent scream propagating, each of us unable to remove it without end without voice without release. As we pull out our blades to eradicate our silent screams, you wish you never discovered the silent scream expression. And since you haven't, having not eradicated the scream, you eradicate the silent scream before it begins.

You doubt existence needs another expression anyhow. Even if you eliminate one in creating another. How to make a net gain? Recall, you live in a capitalist society and you don't get to choose into which world you're birthed. Perhaps there would be a profit if, by eradicating the scream, you eradicated its cause. Perhaps then you also would not engender the silent scream, since no one would be motivated to scream, if you eradicated the cause of all screams. If that were the case, by exterminating the scream you would liberate the world from terror, from fear, from wild joy, from unbridled release, from animal anger, no not animal anger but from human rage, from surpassing pleasure, from the unknown abyss, from the sounds of children. Or perhaps it would be more reasonable for you to focus on liberating the world from only one of these scream-inducing triggers, so you don't end disappointed. But simply killing the resultant scream will not liquidate the cause. Treating the symptoms does not cure the disease or handicap or psychiatric condition. Though it makes you feel better. Furthermore, what caused the scream, what created it, what screamed it, was a human. By silencing the scream, would you destroy a man? Do you feel no remorse for your tyranny? Are you deaf to the humanity of others? Does not a scream have as much right to be screamed as a song to be sung or a sweet nothing to be spoken or an unreadable story to be written? Would you deprive a man or woman of his or her scream, his or her voice, his or her expression, regardless of if he or she is already dead? The scream could have been his or her last act, his or her wordless last word, all that he or she left behind of him-or-herself even if it's gone. Who are you to persecute a person's scream? Let the scream be.

No, no, no. You've reasoned yourself blind, you observe. You've splattered logic on the ceiling, you chastise. You're experiencing buyer's remorse, you reassure yourself. You made a choice. You're just hungry. You you you you you you you –

You start over, once again, to clarify yourself to yourself and to us. That is not you. You do not shirk responsibility; you are not the kind of person who rationalizes yourself out of doing your duty. This is you. The kind of person who sows, grows, and harvests responsibility. You've said it before, and you'll say it again if the situation warrants. There are real people out there afflicted with screams, of whom you are one, and you have chosen to do them a service. You

have decided that is why you are here. To end the scream's persecution. You mean the persecution of the scream. You mean how the scream persecutes you, by whom you mean everyone, all of us, for we are one. You stay inside because it is the responsible, the considerate, the logical act. If you went gallivanting around thoughtlessly pursuing your scream, the scream would outsmart you and your quest would be made futile. Utilized. You would be in constant motion without making progress. Progressing. You would sleep in whatever bed you came to without peaking under its skirts, as if it didn't matter what was under the bed, without pro/con lists, as if your wordchoice and semantics were irrelevant and uninsightful, without weighing each choice upon the scales of the well-robed and matriarchal Justice, as if there were no ethical exoskeleton upon which to hang a decision. You would perform act after act after act. But you wouldn't get any closer to the scream. Let the scream come to you, like your pizza so long in coming. Let the scream be delivered. You know what's needed. You must stay stationary, like a lost child waiting for its mother to find it. With a touch of thought, a pinch of reason, a smorgasbord of logic, you can catch the scream.

Enough spending – no, too much economic commentary. Enough spouting – no, too obvious, though geysers are nice. Enough spasming – too much confusion of sex and epilepsy, you think. Enough splooging – too gross. Enough spunking – too colloquial. Enough spelunking – too claustrophobic. Enough spanking yourself with logic. No, almost, but too funny. Enough spewing your logic on yourself – closer, you're going for a mixed metaphor here, the more metaphor the better, but do you mean to mix masturbation with vomiting? Enough sperming – come on, put in a little effort – enough spleening – the spleen's always a viable option – enough sporing – there you are. You knew you could do it. Enough sporing your logic into thin air. Use it on the scream. Use yourself on the scream.

Use your reason on the scream. What are the reasons to scream? You brainstorm screams, including screams you previously disregarded as inappropriate for your story, because you've started over and you lacked your full arsenal of reason so soon after being disturbed by the scream. You have outwaited your indecision. You have gathered yourself for the attack. You pursue the scream's perpetrator internally. And yes, you know the fallibility of memory, or at least your own, you who remember so little of who you are. Though the scream haunts you, compels you, teases you, you can no longer describe it in words. Its distinctiveness is fading, its uniqueness absorbed by other screams. You can no longer replay the scream in your head, as you never could, and declare that the scream was of this or that gender, of life or death, of young or old, of sex or birth, of fear or joy. Without memory of the scream, it's as if you

weren't there to hear the scream, as if you are arriving on the scene after the fact, like the detective you are, always late, to accumulate evidence, inspect motives, slather on logic, puzzle together what happened from the chaos of information and multiplicity of clauses and pizza out the truth.

What caused the scream? You continue to begin a list of possible reasons we scream at 32.

33.

Step out of the ambulance into spring. Sun, rain, the perfume of hyacinth, the song of songbirds, the bok of feral chickens. The immense blooming forsythia your wife if you had one didn't care for, a galaxy bursting with thousands and thousands of yellow stars. The long line of daffodils your wife if she was yours didn't love because they resemble yellow teacups on yellow saucers always tipped and spilling their yellow tea. The ubiquitous yellow dandelions your wife if she ever was was not fond of despite their planetary conquest and edible root and weavability in golden crowns and the wishful blowiness of their seed by children if they ever were. All the flowers that remind you of your unrequited yellow or golden possible relationship (you've no desire to delve deeper into your personal floriography) are in bloom. Glacier lilies. The snow is melted. The chaos of your footsteps, the record of your passage here and there and back again, treading on yourself, the tracks of the chase, of the Woozles and the Wizzles, of the giant peach slung in the sky, of a little prince from a tiny planet, of the Heffalump (*It had the biggest head you ever saw, a great enormous thing, like – like nothing. A large big – well, like a – I don't know – like an enormous big nothing. Like a jar.*), of creatures from stories your children if you had children either demanded you read nightly or never found as vital as you, stories without swords or guns or villains or antagonists, stories without beheadings or screams or rape, stories absurd, are melted. Where have you been? The ground is all sog and mud and squish. The chickens. How you've neglected them. The chickens run from the backyard to greet you. The hens, formerly dependent on you for their feathered and egged life, trail chicks and cluck at you. Your chickens live despite you. They have learned to fend. They have gone feral. They --

-- Enough with the diary diarrhea, cuts in Viola. To complete my case and make it jury proof, I need one more piece of evidence. You enter the house and assault your corpse in the Lay-Z-Boy. Kill yourself, what do you care, you're already dead. Evisceration, cannibalization, pull the plug, euthanasia, the more nauseating the better to substantiate your psychotic imagination. Then I'll arrest you in the act. Got it? Be the you who victimized you and everybody. Then we'll

be certain you're the culprit. I'm confident you'll be convicted and removed from the population, preventing further contamination of the gene pool and corruption of our cultural narrative. By my calculations several more of you will be joining us presently, drawn like moths to flame, children to candy, modern man to ennui or irony or absurdity, flies to the dead, counterculture to the mainstream, branching rivers to the ocean, vultures to carrion, the rich and the poor to money, monarch butterflies to ancestral migration sites, a salmon to upstream spawning grounds, or a dog to home once you begin to assault your corpse. I'll nab all of you like bubbles in a can of pop. Spring makes me effervescent. I can't help it, the world stinks of procreation, the worlds are fecund hopes, in spring if at no other time until next spring, and yes it's a mistake but I'm a little horny, it's the sunshine, sunlight degrades ennui like parasite eggs and gonorrhea viruses, and that French word makes me shudder, or maybe quiver -- go, go, go, please, before we lose ourselves in each other and live too much in the spring now and squander all we've discovered, all the miles we've traveled, all the doings we've struggled to do, and care about nothing but our shared joy.

You can't think of sex at a time like this, let alone intimations of love, no matter how little underwear Viola wears or where her tears twine. You're her sidekick and her prisoner, her customer and her author. To make love or something like it with her would be ethically wrong and utterly enjoyable under the circumstances, and if she wanted to you'd have no choice. You have ceased to think for yourself if you ever did, to make your own choices if such a thing is possible, to determine your fate if said act is not an intellectual conceit. Cooperative, remorseful, submitting to her enforcement of law and order and purpose and decency and meaning, you simultaneously enter your home, your last chapter, your 27, via your front door and in an act less like sexual intercourse than consumption or absorption or comprehension or digestion or annihilation or reading or inhalation or being read are taken into Viola at 21.

32. I.

Birth: A mother gave birth and screamed painfully, exhaustedly, or partitioningly. A baby was born and screamed needfully, wrathfully, or respiringly. Either or both could have screamed or caused a scream, as evidenced by a long lineage of screaming mothers and their babies.

34.

Your ear aches. You arrive at the South Pole screamless and suffering from unintended consequences. Before you began this downward spiral, you did not

consider how when you reached the South Pole there would be no more down, no south to go. To go on would mean retracing your steps northward and going where you've been, an unprofitable or shameful inefficiency in a modern investigation. Though you've begun or continued to feel unmodern. You are old. From a different time. It's taken a long time to walk in a spiral direction at three miles an hour with eight, no, be honest, six hours of sleep a night, five oftentimes, or less, but an average, six then, ballpark, too much and too little, a compromise and mean. You could probably figure how long, from the latitude of $47^{\circ} 15' 0''$ N, bearing due east, sidestepping whatever distance you sidestep (one foot, two feet, one foot and six inches?) each time you complete your circle of the Earth and begin again in ever diminishing circles, no first increasing and then decreasing sub-equatorially. You should stop, but in your long dotage you've a tendency to indulge and figuring is all you've got and you figure an integral would be a good tool for your figuring. No, please don't spend your time figuring tiresomely when the exact amount of time it's taken you is irrelevant and a vagueness such as "a long time" will suffice, except you are meticulous, it's the principle of the thing, either everything matters or nothing, you figure. Stop backward-looking and start forward-looking. You are of a time when you were vital. Fine, listen, if you must retreat into figures and determine a number before continuing, ditch the calculus. Calculate or look up the surface area of the Earth; multiply it by the percentage of the Earth you've covered; divide it by the width of your path; ignore that your paths overlap. That's a gross estimation of how far you travelled linearly, which you may divide by how fast you travelled to ascertain how long you travelled. Check your units. You are a time. Check your work. You are a number. You are determined. Determinate. Still. Still. Still. You are figuring. Indeterminate. Ongoing. Frustrating finality and vexing determination and defying conclusion. You'd rather be figuring than solved. You're going to freeze to death with an untreated ear infection. Which is maybe what you want. You are exasperating. You are an anachronism, a word written in ink, a narrative, the absurdity of free will and choice, and you are only beginning your return trek northward, unsure if you will make it above the 47th parallel, not to mention fifteen minutes yet further, to continue your search for the scream before you die of exposure or old age or cancer, which are synonyms. You act like you don't care. You're not even figuring anymore. Adding to your malaise, the penguins have not been nearly as friendly as you'd hoped; the leopard seals dive into the water at your approach; and the polar bears you long to behold near-at-hand and embrace and feed with your body as you scream and end your quest do not live in Antarctica. If only you had two eyes, you could be crushed

by a calving glacier. If only your ear didn't torture you, you could ride an apathetic iceflow somewhere. Your indifference pains. Deepening your melancholy is the lack of light this time of year, the perception of eternal night, the suspicion that not even the incessant stars are forever, a sense of temporality and eternity counteracted and reinforced on occasion by the shimmering iridescent undulations of the aurora borealis coquettishly veiling the breadth of the universe in sinuous physics you can never touch. Your exhaustion and the cold exacerbates your ear infection, which you have come to believe began as swimmer's ear, an inflammation of the ear canal caused by a virus contracted from the ear's otoacoustic emissions and, given the perfect moist breeding ground with all your swimming to cross the vast seas (you could not and cannot walk on water) bred so successfully in your outer ear, building an immense population pressure, that the virus performed the unheard of feat of mutating past your tympanic membrane and infecting your middle ear, already turgid with lymphatic fluid improperly draining due to a pinched or plugged Eustachian tube, thereby creating a fetid hotbed for further viral reproduction (nano-robots raping your cells, claiming your nuclear material as their intellectual property, enslaving your physical resources, ((colonizing)), and mortally bursting the cells with eruptions of industrially fabricated seed sent forth to do the same, and calling it life), which further increased your production of lymph fluid (to transport sufficient white blood cells and antibodies to litigate the licentious congress and orgy of pillaging in your middle ear), putting a great pressure on your eardrum, causing you intense pain and preventing the eardrum's movement, deafening your right ear. And now, from the teeming equatorial port of your middle ear where you squalidly dither, the infection squirms into your inner ear by a back door, under the table, through a cracked window, colonizing your holy land (your immune system is overtaxed and your material decadence is ripe as a petri dish and your infrastructure of reason is in perpetual decline and your intellectual culture can either not comprehend mixed ((multiple)) metaphors or synthesize them into singularity). You contract labyrinthitis. You exhibit all the classic symptoms: dizziness and severe balance disorder, nausea, vertigo, hearing loss beyond the essential deafness you've already attained, and anxiety, yes, more anxiety for you who already don't know what you're doing or where you're going or why, more anxiety for you who relate so poorly to others and draw so little comfort from their presence, more anxiety for you who are already a barely functioning member of society, more anxiety for you who can only be called human in the loosest biological sense of the word, more like a mushroom, no, your rhizomes lack communal reach and you are less successful than fungi at utilizing decomposition, or like a barnacle, but you're not entirely dependent on

a whale or other leviathan for motion, a snail then, no you carry no home on your back, more like a slug, nothing but slime, unloved, on hands and knees though slugs have neither hands nor knees, alone, thousands of other slugs all around you who are identical to you but to whom you have no relation and of whom you are unaware, depositing a glistening trail to mark where you've been. Alone, fed up with yourself, perhaps hungry, you sluggishly abandon retracing your steps. In search of sustenance or a scream or anything, in search of nothing, you creep directly north. You lost your sense of direction with your balance, but you head toward the sun, itself wavering from east to west but always slung northward, until you get far enough north that it is slung southward, the sun which you cannot bear to look at, how it spikes the pain though your eye is a different organ than your ear. You crawl, you cannot stand, it's all you can do to put one knee in front of the other, one hand in front of one knee, and not look up lest you make eye contact with anyone, you've abandoned your quest, you squirm home a failure. How can you go on? How can you live with yourself? You'd lie down in the mud and rot to death and let the crows have you and your headless hen except for the possibility that you'd be seen, that some twat would kick you or write a story about you or pick you up and carry you to the hospital and save you and thereby recommit you in this life from which you crave release, to lie here until you are no more, which you essentially do despite your slight indication of motion. Insolently or indifferently or despondently or painfully or wearily you glance up to see if you're moving or not and see a hairy being, a wagging tail, a creature that does not think itself better than you, that doesn't want to change you, an animal that is capable of unequivocal love, bolt by you. Though you still must crawl due to the vertigo, you pick up the pace on your bloody hands and knees, over mountains, through desert and swamp and savannah. And as you swim the crawl stroke across rivers and lakes and oceans, you notice how your reflection resembles your old, by now deceased, East Neighbor in age and deafness and weathered outdoorsman ruggedness and desolation. You feel a greater sympathy for him, a sympathy you don't know what to do with, except to try to give it to what cannot possibly be his dog that you chase, that you once hated for shitting in your yard and stealing your chickens' eggs but who is now a possible, possibly the only possible, receptacle for your love and recipient of your hen and sponge for your anxiety and ears for your hearing and reason you still drag your stick, chasing on hands and knees to 29.

32. II.

Murder: The murdered have been known to scream as the gun is raised or

the water rises or the baton is swung or the axe falls. The scream is not a plea for mercy, or a shriek of pain, or a sob of sorrow and self-pity, but the terror of nonexistence. Murderers have also been known to scream while in the act, not to strike fear into the hearts of their victims, who they are already murdering, and not precisely for courage, but to obliterate their self-consciousness in the moment, to silence our protests in their head, to push the part of us that could never murder, especially with such grotesque awareness, whether or not we loved or hated the victim, or a little of both, over the precipice and leave behind the part of us, the piece of them, that could. They scream to murder their consciousness.

35.

You enter a theater. Black but for a spotlight center stage on a bed. On the bed, a white top sheet folded back on a white bottom sheet. Another spotlight lights you. From within the light you cannot see the audience but you feel their eyes all around above. The circular light creeps toward the bed, pushing you with it. You cannot leave the light. Your light merges with the bed's light, not increasing the size of the circle of light at center but doubling its intensity. Doubling the blackness of the rest of the room. It's you and a bed in a pool of light. You don't know what to do. All the eyes make you an actor naked but for ragged threads of wool matted to your skin gray and scabby and shivering despite the heat of the light and you don't know if that's you or your character on stage twitchy and emaciated and shifty-eyed or if there is no difference anymore but you have to do something. You test the boundary of the light and your hand exits and enters darkness. It's gone. You snatch it back and skitter to the bed. The eyes weigh on you. Waiting. Watching. Hungry. Expecting. It's you and a bed in the light on a stage. You climb into the bed and pull the sheet over you, all the way over you, over your head, and pretend they're not there. They cannot see you. You are safe. The bed is hard. The bed is made of stone, white marble, a soft stone. There is no bottom sheet. The bed is cold despite the light, despite the top sheet. A clacking approaches from far away, growing louder. An insect sound. The sheet is pulled down and folded to your waist by an old, old man, or by a man who you assume is old. It's hard for you to estimate an age because he lacks a face, lacks the muscles, skin, fat, nerves, cartilage, etcetera. His raw skull houses two eyes which appear abnormally large and bug-eyed, teeth and gums permanently grimacing and huge without the drapery of lips, no nose, no flesh from scalp to neck and ear to ear, hair a non-descript brown shading to gray not unlike your own, atop a wizened body, not unlike your own. You've been in the Labyrinth much longer than you are aware of. His eyes are brown, like or unlike your own. His tongue is geographic, less likely like your own. He dotters over a dolly of tools. Tsks. He unrolls a cloth of gleaming surgical cutlery: scalpels of all sizes, tweezers, tongs, a baster, scissors, shears, fork, spoon, forceps, clamps, brace and assorted drill bits, a hacksaw. He dons operating gloves and surgical mask. Fork and scalpel in hand, he bends over your face and looks you in the eye but you are dead to him, or that's what his facelessness expresses, no recognition, no remorse, no sympathy or empathy or pithy pathos, nothing. Maybe death. He slices delicately around your face, hairline, between temple and ear, behind and under the jaw, up the other side. He works the scalpel deftly under your skin from the top, down the forehead, facing you instead of scalping you, defacing you delicately, slipping his fingers under your face, working the muscle and subcutaneous tissue loose, snipping nerves, ending the pain, folding

down your face as he progresses. It takes a long time. Hours. Days. During which you stare up into the confining light and feel the weight of eyes holding you here, on the table. You can't close your eyes because your eyelids are attached to your face and your face is face down on your chest. Is that why all the eyes watch you incessantly from the black gallery: have they too lost their face and cannot close their eyes? Is that where you'll go next, to the gallery, from actor to audience, once your face is another's? To wait your turn, to observe and observe and observe until you understand, until you complete your residency in the gallery and matriculate to surgeonhood and lay scalpel and claim to the face of an unsuspecting or reluctant or submissive or resistant or undecided donor? How long can you last, faceless, hungry, jockeying with the rabble in the thick gallery for a better view, constantly dehydrating from lidless eyes and lipless mouth and noseless nose? Will you be able to wait your turn, or will the faceless hungry turn on you when you cut in line? Are you already infected? Your breathing has increased in rate and decreased in depth, you are clammy, your heart palpitates. You show the symptoms of going into shock and you are about to scream from having your face peeled off, not from the pain but from what the peeling means for your future, your job prospects, mate-finding, feeling the hot glance of sun, who will recognize you, how to acquire the necessary photo identification to exist in society, how you'll find glasses that'll stay on without a nose, contacts will dry out, goggles?, let alone what watching this procedure performed repeatedly until you know it by heart can perform it with your eyes closed if you could close them ready to make the best of the opportunity to take someone else's face will do to your psychic makeup, when the surgeon lays his hand on your shoulder in a touching gesture that you take to mean, Relax. Be still. I know what I'm doing. You calm as he snips your external carotids and cuts off the blood flow to your face and lays your face, flaccid and flat, larger now removed from your skull, on a tray on a moist towelette and then with alligator clips clamps the arteries leaking in your neck. He pulls a makeup mirror from the bottom shelf of the dolly and sets it on top and turns on its lights. He pulls a stool from below your bed and sits on it before the mirror. With a dentist's napkin chain, he hangs your face facedown from his neck. He unclips one of his alligator clips and with needle and thread sutures one of his external carotids to one of your face's. Then the other. Restoring blood flow to your face quickly and efficiently, minimizing cell mortality and the rigidifying of facial flexibility and the death of expression. He tilts his head back, flips your face up, and puts it on, massaging it with his fingertips, pressing it into the hollows, squishing it around, plying the edges, squeezing the nose with curiosity, stretching the cheeks over his cheekbones, working its fit. He

stitches it to his scalp, darns it to his neck. When he's done, he wears your face. It doesn't look exactly as it did on you. Nor, you imagine, does it look like his did on him. The face is ashen and sags here and swells there and is as of yet inexpresive, but now that he's faced he looks less monstrous, spectral, dead, more human. You try to sit up but he pushes you down with the same understanding smile you used so often on your spouse if you had one and turns you on your stomach. He slices a wide strip of flesh off your back as precisely as a butcher. He bandages you with gel and gauze and tape and flips you back over. He holds your backstrap in his mouth, tears a piece off, and chews. His face regains color as he uses it, a flush in the cheeks, red in the lips, a smile or grimace around the eyes. It's not a bad face. Your back aches from lying on the table so long and from having a swath of skin removed. He lays your back skin over your facelessness, works it snug, cuts it to fit, slices slots for your eyeholes and mouth hole, and sews down your new, temporary, you hope, featureless face. A blank slab without eyelids or lips or a nose or muscles to move the skin. The mr. potato head face that a child if you had one or entropy if not lost all the parts to will presumably prevent infection and not cause the immune response that you wonder how your surgeon is avoiding from his foreign face. Perhaps that is why he ate a swatch of you. That, and he's probably hungry, like you. It was a long procedure. Your flesh is outside him and inside him. You rise, resolved to your predicament, to see it through, to endure until you can steal another's face, momentarily shorn of your identity, even if it's a long moment, or not quite shorn, it was only your face, not these thoughts, not your past actions, not your particular neural network, not much more than another haircut on the first day of summer. Thundering applause inundate you and wash away your thoughts. Surgeon and patient bow. The light leads the patient to a flight of stairs, which the patient mounts. He takes his seat, warm and recently vacated, in the packed audience of similarly featureless faces. Another unidentifiable face of an audience member descends like a moon. The audience member become new surgeon unstitches his unreadable face while all eyes, eyes which cannot close, turn to the tunnel, waiting for the next donor. The ex-surgeon, feeling like a fresh start, a new pair of shoes, a new summer, a new suit, nevermind the tattered eden fig-leaf-like rags of wool and subterranean seasonlessness and bare bloody feet, a new face, ready to face whatever tasks remain to you, exits through the fourth wall as the cheers die.

If the fourth wall is oriented to the:

North, slip behind your shadow cast before you by a southern sun and follow it forever to 178.

East, writhe facing the rising sun twice forever to 171.

West, scuttle a full night of forevers following the unseen sun arcing westward from its western set to its eastern rise at 40.

32. III.

Sex: Some of us scream during sex, especially at orgasm. Most of us do not, though we wish we did. Or at least that our partners did. As long as it doesn't wake the children, if we have them. In the adult entertainment industry, such a scream is more likely to be perpetrated by the woman. You have no way to verify that real female orgasms cause more screams than male, though in your experience men are less expressive and less content and less likely to be productive members of society. Whether female or male, our orgasmic screams have a different timbre than other screams. You don't want to think too hard about our sexual screams because they are distracting, tempting, arousing, and we do not perform for free, and it's become apparent you're unemployed and strapped for cash if not to your chair, but you think our male orgasmic screams have a simian grunt to them, while our female orgasmic screams are plaintive baleen wails or the cooing of a dove talking to itself or fabricated with an extra "Oh" like an opossum playing dead.

36.

You know what you are. Feral. A dog gone back to wolf, or back toward it, a dog halfway between dog and wolf. A wolf without a pack, a dog without a man. The bloodhound in you bellows your solitude to the moon. The terrier in you snaps the necks of rodents no matter how large, of vermin no matter how benign. You live off the pests of man, off living fossils existent before man, hunting like man who killed off most prehistoric mysteries, hunting with skills man bred into you, an engineered implement: the digging, the neck snap, the fast-twitch reflex. You also live off roadkill like a crow scavenging smeared squirrel or screamed opossum or atomized deer or immigrant armadillo of turtle-like armor and pig-like snouts and rabbit-like vectors of reproduction and a human propensity for suicidal leaps in the face of headlights. But breaking a nutria mother's neck and digging her young out of their burrow and eating them feeds a higher contentment in you, not because they taste better than aardvark newborns or armadillo pinkies but because they are more rat-like, a pest, choking out species like you and incessantly fornicating like everything and destroying habitat like man, no more likes, like nutria acting like nutria in yet another attempt to subjugate the world. You relish the chance to crush partially-formed nutria

vertebrate, to consume a squealing mother and her sexually-immature young, to close the book on this family tree, to end just one story, to eliminate all possible future stories branching from this one nutria line. Which pleases your master. Who is not present, whom you have lost, who has lost you. You miss his companionship. He who loves you in his way and tosses you his scraps, whom you love and submit to and whose scraps you long for, who loves you even when you drag your ass on the carpet and whom you love even when he forgets to feed you, who especially loves you when you slaughter his rodents and you him when he scratches your rump. You cannot remember your name. But you have a good sense of direction. Eating the young nutria family has led you down through dark pavlovian passages and narrow neuronal wormholes and along inadequate ledges hung on arrogant cliff faces and over a single unsteady wanting bridge spanning either your bottomless void or your moat of molten gray matter into the dank honeycomb maze of your brain where your master and his heavy hand slumber. The comforting blanket of duty, the collar of service, and the leash of purpose reawaken. Despite being lost so long, you make a beeline for home. You're a long way from home. It takes a long time. You pass through nutria-less and armadillo-less and aardvark-less regions. You run clear across the Earth into the cold. Or else the continents move toward the poles, carrying you. Or both of your relative motions combined, added together, you and the crust of the Earth work in unison to move you closer to home through the snow belt -- no, not the belt, but the collar, the blanket, the leash -- until you are on the same continent as home, the same tectonic plate, making the tectonic motion irrelevant, which it perhaps always has been except on a geologic timescale and near volcanoes or in earthquake prone regions, because the continent does not move relative to you but you relative to it, over it, toward an essentially stationary home separated from you by an ever-shrinking yet great distance as your coat grows mangy and you thin and your paws bleed and the roadkill and vermin and lidless garbage cans are fewer and farther between. You travel slowly, as fast as you can, listlessly if purposefully, drained if desperate, ragged and tough, limping and loping, nose to the ground. You break trail through the snow. You haven't eaten in forever. Your eyes droop. You lie down. You are near death. You smell near death. At the smell of near death your adrenaline drops and your heartbeat jumps from the snow and your legs function. The winter fog, as if rising from a body of water such as a river or lake warmer than the air temperature on a cold day, lifts from your eyes. You join a path, a trail already broken, the near death smell near, a rot scent frozen in the snow, the sheen of decay sparkling on the surface. Your new purpose is to trail the life-giving, near death smell. A long way off before you, going around a bend and disappearing behind a white hill sparsely dotted

with the skeletons of black trees, silently limps a figure in a dark gray cloak leaning heavily on a scythe, his other hand handless, and -- from what you can smell and hear of the high frequencies beyond the range of human perception that therefore do not negate the silence -- one-eyed. A figure that looks like a man, but your rodent-hunting vermin-ridding blood-hounding hackles have risen and you intuit the chance to commit a service to man as you return to him. You choose without choosing to follow him as fast as you are able, which is not fast, around white hills and around bare spinneys and under leafing arbors and past dilapidated barns that could offer shelter from cold early spring rains if you ever stopped and over bridges over engorged rivers and over green hills and through vast empty newly-planted fields and under towering pines shedding murderous loads of snow from their branches and past seasonless horizon-blotting cities, making up ground if meagerly, chasing him in slow motion for days and days and days to 31.

32. IV.

Rape: You don't have any ingenious insights into the screams of our rapes and violations that will not offend us and demean you in our eyes with your attempts to be clever while assessing a shameful, debasing, disgraceful act. You merely observe that some of us force another of us to play the role of our sexual partner against our will. We scream both from the violation of our body, the pain private and our body not, and from the violation of our personhood, the stripping of our identity and the disregard for our borders and the violent claims made on us, our inability to defend ourselves, to choose otherwise, to act. Our powerlessness. You say, I am sorry some of you have been forced to have nonconsensual sex. Used, voided, shuddering, curled around our last useless self-defense, clutching our ripped and tattered defiance, we say to you, You know not of what you speak. Rape is not about sex.

37.

- I'm calling about the scream.
- Lots of people calling about a scream. Same scream or different scream?
- I don't know. But the same scream I may have called about before.
- May have?
- Probably.
- Certainly?
- Possibly.
- Speaking of which, it's possible I've only gotten one call about the scream,

but I've gotten it a lot.

-- I have new information –

-- We have too much information. We have to regulate it, forget it. Every call's about the scream and the calls don't stop. Haven't the chance to investigate, there're so many calls about the scream. No time to determine if this is an isolated scream or a serial scream or an infectious scream or if everyone's screaming to ruin our day. So much noise we can't think. Got one call about the scream and nobody said nothing, just heavy breathing. Another guy called to report a scream and then ordered a phone call to his mother and a whore and sometimes a pizza.

-- I thought you'd only received one call about the scream.

-- How many times have you called?

-- I'm not sure.

-- Thousands of times. Clogging up the lines – what if someone's trying to call with new information?

-- I have –

-- You only get one chance, and you already called. Hang up.

-- You hang up.

-- Can't. Against regulations for me to shoot first or hang up first.

-- What about the scream?

-- We have the scream under control. The scream's over. Hang up.

-- I don't feel reassured.

-- Go back to where you were and –

-- I'm where I was –

-- Go back to what you were doing.

-- I was calling you and before that hearing a scream and before that it's been suggested that I was reading but it feels like a half-hearted attempt to fill the void of my backstory which is analogous to my internal void because as far as I know I was doing nothing before, which is about what it feels like I was and am doing.

-- Go back to who you were.

-- Who am I?

-- Hang up and introduce yourself.

-- What if I'm nothing but a response to a scream?

-- Do something not in response to the scream.

-- Doesn't the scream deserve to be responded to?

-- You're gonna make me scream.

-- Please, don't. It's just that by its very existence, its presence, the scream seems to demand –

-- Aaahh –

-- Thank you for your assistance. Goodbye.

Unreassured, you go back to what you were doing,
whether it was

calling your West Neighbor at 57.

going to your East Neighbor's at 185.

calling the cops at 158.

Reassured, you say, “Fuck the scream,” and return to
what you were doing and continue doing it to 195.

38.

You wonder if you've fallen back on your pattern of falling back on addictive absorbing abnegating selfannihilating behavior. The drugs, the rehab, the drinking, the sex or abstinence with damaged or emotionally negligent or socially deviant men, the social deviancy, the social advocacy, the selfmutilation or adornment via teardrop tattoos, the ritual meditation, the nightly prayer, the unprogressing pregnancy, the daily exercise, the childrearing in which you've yet to partake, the pet-keeping hypocritical to your environmental ethics, the counseling and communicating and nausea, the anorexia gluttony bulimia dieting, the journaling reading arting, the organic local slowfood cooking, the working, the quitting work, the endless road trip to a Tree City USA that you don't want to go to, can seemingly by natural law never arrive at, and may have passed. Do you care? Apparently you are like the rest of humanity, you realize in your wise old age – have you halved time enough times to shed your fecund adolescent angst and dehydrate as your liquefied tears drip from your drooping undulant skin and your inner fruit ripens or withers to maturity? are you old? the thought makes you want to pee on these words and light them on fire, doing both may be difficult, to scream at them but the thought of screaming at these words makes you feel a responsibility or somehow beholden to said scream and the feeling of responsibility or beholdingness to the unscreamed scream makes you want to scream or else walkaway and climb a mountain or float on a lake or lie in the grass and stare up through leaves and be of no use to anyone or lose yourself permanently in the unforgiving woods, and barring that to buy a bag of mushrooms and a bottle and wake up in a gutter in a foreign country – you need to surrender. When whatever you surrender to proves inadequate to the task of completing you, of using you to complete it, you surrender to something else. It might be about time for that. But fuck, you'd feel better about yourself if you abandoned your journey after you acquiesced to the destination. The trees. Xylem, phloem, utopia, contentment, whatever. Leaves fall all around you, but

where are the trees? Red orange yellow, lobed maple leaves, manyarmed oak leaves, teardrop redbud leaves, generic leaf-shape fruit tree leaves, serrated birch leaves, huge sycamore leaves, prehistoric gingko leaves. You're showered in deciduousness. Larch needles. The air thick with leaves and crisp with earthtones. When you breathe, you inhale them. The leaves are bright, if earthtones can be bright, vibrant if dying matter can be vibrant. The leaves are like leaves cut from construction paper in classrooms. Perhaps they are paper leaves thrown in the air by children, who in the making of the leaves have necessitated swaths of deforestation, including the logging of your destination. Your feet rustle in the debris. You ditched the ambulance a longtimeago, a few feet back, because the distances you travelled were too small and getting cut in half at every iteration. The thing is, even if you are the unwitting incarnation of Zeno's Paradox, you should be really fucking close. Like you should've had a visual of Tree City long before now, long before the refreshing autumnal nip settled and the gentle breeze rose and the leaves began to quake and flutter. And your arms have a definite length, approximately half your wingspan apiece, a length much greater than the distance you currently travel, then halve to create a new distance you travel. You should be able to touch where you're going, a trunk, rough bark, a wayward branch, lowhanging overripe fruit, even if it is physically impossible for you to arrive there, which it's not, the assertion is outrageous and you won't stand for it. If you could touch it you'd be there. You'd grasp a branch and hike up your noskirt and skinny up that skyscraping tree, that heaven-fingering spire, that interdimensionally branching tower – must great sculpture and architecture be phallic? you will dig a hole, you will grow a moist cave, you will build an inviting vaginal treehouse in the ground people will come to live in and worship, no you won't, you don't want anybody to live with you and you already have one hopeful parasite within you and womanhood is not wombhood – the tree, your tree then is not like a phallus – it's a natural born tree, fundamentally inhuman, unman – but like a raised middle finger. If you could touch your tree, you'd live in your treehouse. You'll build it if you have to, if it's not there as advertised, alone. You don't need anybody's help, let alone presence, godforbid company. You have no experience in carpentry or sylvan architecture or nurseries or tree planting, but your body has been biologied for creation and you'll beget the thing wholly formed, not the halfling at which its development is stalled, but complete, a kicking and screaming arboreal buddha whom you'll suckle and hold and comfort, whom you'll teach to sit and stand and walk, not walk, whom you'll teach branching arithmetic and concentric geometry and foliating fractals, whom you'll teach the rustling, creaking, whispering language of trees and the enlightenment of

armswidespread, feetdeeprooted, sunsoaked canopies. A sapling you'll raise despite your antiprocreative ethos and the loss of self it will entail. Because of the loss of self it will entail. Some projects can be completed; some imagined destinations can be reached; some immaculate conceptions can be brought to term. If you cut your hair in half and then in half again and in half again repeatedly, always in half, even if you resorted to advanced microscopic haircutting technologies, you would one day reach a point that you were bald, the remaining hair invisible to the naked eye and to instruments of science, which is the definition of bald, which you are, until moments later, say the next day if you like even if the time interval is closer to instantaneous, when your hair begins to grow back. You're disgusted with yourself for succumbing to the peer pressure of this paradox, to conforming to the societal norms of this fruitless pursuit, to adhering to this mediocrity of reason, to obeying the rules of halving bestowed on your journey, your existence, when it's your fucking journey. Where is my tree house?! you scream weakly in your ancient way. Are you as old as the gingko? Perhaps. Doesn't matter, there's always something older. You have not survived an atomic bomb like gingkos have. There is always something greater. Which is why you want to arrive in your treehouse. There is no being the ultimate anything. You are the only person here, the only living thing it appears. The leaves are dead, or dying depending on your definition of life. Where is everybody? Where is the city you walked through? You're still in it, are you still in it?, it's everywhere, you think you're in it, it's a city so modern, so generic, so ubiquitous that it is without an urbancore, a downtown, a personality, it's a city without a center, it's a city and not a city, everywhere and nowhere, here and nothere. Like your Tree City? Your city of trees, your tree, your treehouse, whatever the fuck you're looking for. Your screaming good time in the dark night? Your scream of fright in the dark wood? There's no wood, no city, no night, only leaves ankle deep knee deep pelvis deep, brittle and crackling and beautiful, autumnally hued, damp underfoot and dry at the hip, a sea of rustling leaves filled with centipedes and spiders and probably dogshit, and filled with you swimming, with you treading water, neck deep, treading leaves, leaves filled with you, sheaves of leaves, leaves lined with veins, veins dead but sucking the color from the leaves until they're all brown and gray and white, yes white, that's what you said, paper white and lined with veins, and you're fucking frustrated because the leaves are full of you and you are full of the leaves and what do leaves mean, but it's your story – leave, go find your treehouse, don't scream about it, build it or birth it, actualize yourself, or scream if you want, it's your story, if you're scared or joyous or depressed or transcendent or in agony or deformed beyond recognition or pleasured to noend or confused by a draconian

definition of comprehension or bored out of your gourd. Then by all means, scream. Just shut up and do it. Okay then, halfscream to 194 to have heard a scream again. (If you interpret halfscream to mean halfway, by our calculations you would go to 116). Or go halfway back to 184 to look for your tree in this pile of leaves. Go to 111. Wait, we're confused, the rest of us who aren't you, are you going to 111, or halfway there to 74.5, and if the latter please tell us the halflings how. Instead you might go halfway to 186 to 112, or halfway to 112 to 75, or halfway to 75 to 56.5 at which point you're on your own. Exhaust the possibilities. Make a treehouse from leaves. What about halfway to 2, figure the number yourself, never stop searching. Make a tree from paper. Go everywhere. Note there are no decimals in these leaves, only whole integers of leaves, only rational leaves, what would an irrational leaf be, what's $\sqrt{-1}$, i, no, i is imaginary, irrational is neverending nonrepeating indivisible, in conclusion we don't know how you would go there, we only know halfways halftruths maybe square roots, or how to accompany you, or if we want to hold your hand and set out into the instructionless void or wilderness with you without a map or a manual or any training in building treehouses, though you are bald and you do have a workmanlike use of language and a significant desperate worthwhile stimulating laboring soul, we must say, as you sway, for your age, as you walk away, with a utopian halfgestated babybump and noskirt and nounderwear beckoning us to join you though you don't invite us and infact deny us you. You leave alone. Not with half or a quarter or an eighth or one-sixteenth or one-thirty-second of us. Alone. You leave with your tattooed tears. You leave us the remainder of your pizza, which we split until it's gone. We, the leaves, will miss you treading upon us and through us and in us. It might not have been love, but it might have been halflove. It's been nice knowing you. Farewell. You tree, you leave, you go.

32. V.

Powerlessness: Rape is explained not as the uncontrolled desire for sex but as the exercise of power. In V instead of IV, in an attempt to save face and maintain your superiority but oblivious to how your lumping together of the literal and the metaphoric rape offends us, you expand the definition of rape: the powerful exercising their power on the powerless. Usually to gain more power. You sometimes exchange the word money for power – in this logic, material possessions are displays of power and our desire for what we lack is a tool for our subjugation. Wealth exists in a parallel world above us that we cannot touch. It perpetuates itself. We make wealth a deity. Our desire for money, the dangled carrot, our drive for influence and our frustration with the paucity of our single unmoneyed vote, our wanting

to not want power or influence or money but how we can't afford it, our powerlessness coupled with our powerlessness to change our powerlessness renders us nobodies, pawns, numbers, poll percentages, notches, toys, unemployment figures, tools, pets, robots, cogs, consumers, plastic figurines, and receptacles for he or them or He or you who rapes us. You who are one of us, but have forgotten. Futilely we scream as we are violated, as we are despoiled, as who we are is crushed, who we were is negated or twisted to serve a new truth, and who we will be is not a souled, chemically unique individual but a contributing member of an economy, a spender, a facelessness, a probability, a community, a character in a story written by another, a human who has no meaningful choices left to us when choice is what makes us human.

39.

She closes the door. You sit in a swiveling bucket seat in the well-appointed rear of the ambulance. She sits behind you on a high stool and takes your head in her hands callused from pizza delivering and scream policing. She consults a thick well-worn book on a podium open to pages displaying orthogonal views of a skull partitioned like a map wherein outlined sections of the skull are numerically referenced in a key. You are a big ball of dough in her hands. She kneads.

-- We don't have time to argue, every choice matters now, a serial killer could be on the loose and I've finally kneaded through the substantial continuum of gray matter that has accumulated on the exterior of your skull. When did you shower last and did your mother not teach you basic hygiene? I'm a full finger deep. I've reached bone. Your scalp is grease slathered on hand-tossed crust, your dandruff a cheesy sauce, your hair an illusion of personality-establishing vegetable topping. Time to deliver you. What do you feel?

-- Relief.

-- It says here that the brain is the organ of the mind and that brain function is localized. Character, thoughts, and emotions are physically locatable in the brain and are thus tangibly assessable. Explanations are attainable. Hence, relief.

-- What are your fingers doing with my head?

-- As you are the only living witness to the scream and indeed the only live person I've encountered while investigating the scream and its multiple corpses, I'm determining your personality.

-- You said I only have the illusion of a personality.

-- Here, where your neck tendons join the back of your head ... a bulge, but not overly bulbous. Now that is because you stare at the sky or/and enjoy sex.

-- Yes, both, but not incessantly. Only until the sky and/or sex staves me in with sadness instead of staving off sadness.

-- Hence, your amative zone is not sickeningly large, which it is in nymphomaniacs, pilots, and those who mount tall buildings only to leap from them. The Amative Bulge narrows to a ridge climbing the back of your skull, emphasizing what is precisely an averagely developed philoprogenetiveness. You love your children, existent or nonexistent, and miss them, alive or dead, and are set adrift by their absence, but you do not feel that way about children that are not yours. Your Philoprogenetive Ridge is given its average prominence by the deep Hollows of Adhesiveness (the attachment to friendship and society) and Combativeness (the courage to resist, the will to overcome, and the spirit to confront injustice) to either side of the ridge. Note a wobble in the depth of the Hollow of Combativeness: you do not lack antagonism or defiance or foot-dragging resistance, but the will to act. Following central ridge up the back of your head, we climb the Tower or Spire or Chimney of Concentrativeness (your morbid ability to dwell) and pitch your Tent of Inhabitiveness (dome or A-frame, your desire to both stay and go). The ridge forks as it approaches your summit, its two tines rising in parallel, or at least without touching, the swells manifesting your Swollen Need of Approbation and Tumorous Conscientiousness, before terminating abruptly at your crown at the exact mathematical midpoint between dorsal and ventral, clifffing out at the bilateral Canyons of Hope, the two chasms of which are connected by the complete Absence of Veneration, and which, when taken with the Declivity of Self-Esteem (the valley draining the two aforementioned ridges, waters springing from the alpine Junction of Inhabited Concentration ((tangible justification of your ability to persevere with this inquiry)) and slowing through the Basin of Firmness before the confluence with venerationlessness) form the Grand Gorge bisecting and draining your scalp. We cross the gorge, an undertaking magnificent with mules and dehydration and hardship. As we creep toward the spectacle of your forehead, we lose all elevation suddenly but without the splendor of sheer cliff faces. We are quagmired in the lowlands of your hairline, the Bog of Benevolence. Our muddy fingertips drag us up an imperceptible lateral rising to the less mushy Knoll of Imitation. From solid ground we without surrender march into your Rolling Hills of Wonder, which rise and fall, up and down, rollercoaster-like, through the clear cut of your male pattern (forked-tongue-shaped) baldness. Below us, your forehead is very tall and inescapable and scooped like a snow shovel. You have an overhang or a cornice or a projection at your widow's peak, a prominent brow, and a concave shallow between. The outcrop on which we stand is courtesy of your Comparison

Endowment Agreement, the Disputed Territory of Causality (a phrenological diplomacy: we agree that either the stage right or stage left region of Causality is the region of Incausality and the other, the other), and our Demilitarized Region of Wit or Mirthfulness, an unstable which we take partial credit for because you cannot deny that when your wit is at its highest, your mirth is at its lowest, and vice versa. Your oscillations average to flatness or nothing precisely at the line where your prominent overhang descends desperately to your forehead. Down Tunelessness. Swirling into the Toilet Bowl of Time in the middle of your forehead, which gurgles that your perception of Time is loose and your perception of Eventuality constipated. Whatever that means. Are you as bored as me? I'd never make it in Victorian times. Is phrenology from Victorian times? Founding Father times? Regardless, I'd never make it in Victorian or Founding Father times (look at my mien -- no, in your mind -- face forward and hold still). But to finish what we started, to be American, without looking back, (while I parenthetically ask after the economic use of art or the colonialism of capitalism or the tyranny of the marketplace or the ethics of morality or the commodification of thought of water of democracy), you pull yourself up by your bootstraps out of your mid-forehead Dip in Endurance to the leading edge of your brow, utilizing your halfway decent comprehension of your Relative Position in Locality (as good as any layman's, though you're no Einstein or Hawking) and bull forth into a unique and bulbous and powerful bridge of the nose, right between the eyes, from whence you crow a debilitating, Flagrant Cognizance of Existence as we walk the plank off your face, your nose a bridge whose far end terminates in the abyss. Nevermind, we retreat before the abyss. Your brow is at its highest at the bridge of your nose, at center, in the narrowly appositional sites of Form and Size (peaking then in your claustrophobic Excessive ((perception of)) Space) and gently loses elevation to either side through the High Steppes of Momentum, Weight, and Resistance (you were once respectable at physics) and then through the average-heighted Plateaus of Color, once again rising to a Protuberance of Order and Number that joins with the Ancient Earthen Mound of Constructiveness at your temple. Housed here is your desire to build art and fabrications and engines, to discover science, to say things, and a populous unjustifiably fond of its less placid neighbors: the passions and rages, the severities and capacities for cruelty inhabiting Constructiveness's sister city, Erupting Cankers of Destructiveness, above your ears. Transportation between your Ancient Earthen Mounds of Constructiveness and Erupting Cankers of Destructiveness occurs via your traffic-laden Suspension Bridges of Appetite. Under the bridges of Appetite through the narrow chasms between ear and temple rage the sole outlets from your head. The

previously explored Canyon of Hope bisecting you crown drains at each end into cypress swamps or potter's fields or sewage treatment ponds on either side of your head corresponding to blank spots on the map, The Emptinesses, bordered by the Highlands of Cautiousness and the High Pressure Regions of Ideality (fissured hills locally known as Love of Beauty, Desire for Excellence, Poetic Emotions, Absurd Enthusiasm, Preference for the Glimmer over the Useful, Dwelling in Fancy, and Neglecting Duty). You seep from your blank, empty, unknowable, absent region (there are two but let us pretend we are only on one side of your head) into your Reservoir of Acquisitiveness, which had in your youth been a scenic valley until one inspired day you dammed your absence of desire for the material, your contentment with what you had, your generosity with what happened to fall into your lap, your refusal to possess, at its narrowest point, at the banks of Constructiveness (it's not that you turned greedy; you're either harkening back to a false innocence or your energy needs were increasing, your brain in need of more energy to continue to function as it once had let alone to grow continuously and to stockpile against the surety of future years of drought when your ever-increasing energy needs were guaranteed to be greater than now), behind which a manmade lake is now accumulated, dimpled by wind-driven waves, crests of being unselfish unless it affects you, troughs of not wanting what another has or much caring what he does, whitecaps of avarice, nadirs of joy with unfettered empty hands, a chop not wanting more of anything but yourself, which there is so much of inundating this once and future valley that the land under the reservoir is a dream, invisible, untouchable, so much that your solid surface does not exist under your fluid, so much that the electricity-generating outlet of your short-sighted, technologically backward, and shamefully inefficient dam cannot harness but a trickle of you to turn turbines. Most of you spills over the spillway and into the Flood Control Canal of Secretiveness. The canal, if left to its devices, would be wide and deep; you have a great capacity to restrain your emotions and ideas (or is it that in your natural state you express no thought?). Some call this canal Prudence and some Cunning and some Stoicism and some Inhibition and some Self-Consciousness and some Understanding of Your Worth and some Internalizing until you, a volcano, erupt in words, the fine ash of which asphyxiates you and silts up the canal. You flood. Thank god, finally, your canals leach into your Sump Hole of Combativeness and sump into your Leach Field of Adhesiveness, separated from each other by the Love of Your Children, if no one else, and your Spire of Concentrativeness, etc., so that a circuit of your gray liquid about your cranium cannot be completed without a supernatural act, which explains your stagnancy: you have no circulation. And one more observation, let's not leave anything out of our

investigation, we must be thorough: the right eyeball bulges due to a shallow orbital socket, indicating a facility with language; the sunkenness of the left eye speaks to the opposite. Jesus fuck. Done. Thank you for making the phrenological examination as painless as possible. The End.

She extricates her fingers from your tingling cranium.

-- Why?, you ask.

She slaps you, inviting your face into the tingle. You rephrase.

-- What did we learn from our phrenological inquiry?

-- Are you here? We characterized our lead witness, you. We visualized our lead suspect: "You". We quantified your qualities in words. I'm not going to repeat myself, or not very much. If you want to reread my testimony in the interest of self-actualization, just do it.

-- It implies I'm capable of murder due to, for example, the erupting cankers near my temples and the hopeless gorge running from ear to ear and the tower on the back of my head, but if I concentrate I can make the tower change shape, not to mention –

-- I don't recall. During a reading I enter a higher consciousness of truth speaking, like a deceased parent's disembodied voice, like a musty literary masterpiece, like god chained to words, like politicians mouthing corporations' free speech, like a bearded goat on a –

-- Oww! Those are my hairs!

-- Shut up. You'd think I scalped you. You've plenty, and the words hurt me as much as you. But look at this harvest of short and curlies. Under the microscope: large and spiral. Human: note the uniformity of color and the club-shaped root. Pigment a ubiquitous and banal brown. No braids, beads, or dyes. Race unidentified because even though your hair exudes a specific dominant generic heritage and my skin is alabaster, we are the prelude to our post-racial history. Thickness: thin to the naked eye, thick under the microscope. All in all bearing a high similarity to hair samples I painstakingly collected from the corpse in the chair and from upstairs, where hairs were found crusted in the bedding, trod into the carpet, lodged in dirty underwear, and comingled with the deceased mother's pubic hair, unless you did not accompany me upstairs, in which case I found nothing and the upstairs samples are non-existent. Due to this inconclusiveness, the upstairs hairs are inadmissible in a court of law. Which is ultimately irrelevant, as yet more hair samples that match these of yours and that are more than possible were painstakingly collected by yours truly when you weren't paying attention from a comb and toothbrush and towel and curling iron and soap cake and from behind the toilet bowl in the downstairs bathroom. Your pubic hair cannot be matched to the hair samples collected from and around the

headless man next door, though in that case the variety of samples is immense and isolation of any one individual's hair impossible. Nor is your pubic hair what we can call a match to the samples collected from the headless woman downstairs next door, where the hairs bore a protective and impenetrable patina of gold etched with twining serpents and which furthermore proved too brittle for analysis, as if universally ancient or prematurely aged. The chiseled hairs on the headless sculpture of you in the same room next door are a fair facsimile, if not straight up simile, if not literally your pubes turned to stone, but they appear to be a sort of Everyman's pubes. Of any further hair samples I do not wish to speak, except to say your samples do curiously resemble certain cat hairs found on the headless neighbor's bedspread, though we will write that off as environmental interference, a statistical anomaly, or a metaphysical coincidence unaccountable by our intelligence.

You are outraged.

-- Everyone's pubic hair is short and curly and of middling color. Everyone is implicated.

-- Do you have evidence to support that claim?

-- Claim?

-- Support. Many members of the public choose to braid, bead, trim, or dye their pubic hair. I only buy objective facts. It may influence your thinking to know my hair is not short or curly or of middling color. I am bald.

-- You mean, under there?

-- Under where? Pubic hair reminiscent of your own amplifies the quanta of your presence at the crime scene. My baldness decreases my presence at the crime scene. Don't worry, though the probability of your presence at the crime scene is high, I have not determined or certified or certained that you committed torture and/or murder and/or other unmentionable acts and/or that you caused the scream. Nor will I ever. In my role of lead detective and forensic scientist and pizza girl, I guarantee nothing for certain, neither an accurate recounting of events nor precise perpetrator identification nor delivery time, for as soon as I do some .00hole is certain to put a number, however tiny and preceded by zeroes, on the probability of my wrongness, and I cannot afford to get fired by your mother and hired back in another lower-paying part-time capacity and be even more under over-employed than in this current plastic future where I deform to this job, powerless to affect change and betterment on my and others' lives, if such a thing is possible. You understand that my profession, my self-identification, and all I've said and otherwise expressed in my life makes it impossible for me to 100% any possibility.

Curled over your plucked crotch, pain subsiding, tingling head in your hands

(a low blood sugar issue, or an excess of logic issue, or a dearth of reason issue, or a high remorse depression despair comprehension capitulation futility issue, an absence of anything to be done issue, an abundance of feeling like you must do something issue, an issue of issues, god bless you, as you smell burning hair issue, gesundheit, without tissue, salud, incapacitated and powerless to stop and puppeted by your *** as if it were spring and the mold were blooming), incarcerated in the climate-controlled seasonless ambulance. Viola drones on, unperturbed by your mucus mist dispersal. You are a spasm of issues and the projection of moist issues into shared airspace, a contagion issue --

-- Bless you. Ever heard of a cough pocket? Put your sneeze there too. Continuing, when the moneyed interests have no interest in my wellbeing except that I have enough money to purchase their goods and consumables and derivative imaginings, bless you, bless you, bless you. Where was I? I'm really a very confident person. Note the baldness and no skirt to speak of and what you imagine is no underwear and the tattooed trail of tears and my positions moral (no sex with sidekicks), philosophical (both anything and nothing are possible), and professional (three jobs to make ends meet: detective, forensic scientist, pizza girl). But my confidence is constantly undermined by your lack of self-knowledge, by your inability to decide what happened in what you described as your house in other passages of this book when you thought I wasn't present, by the powers-that-be providing me with such imprecise implements to employ, such ambiguous words to apply, by your apparent apathy to either the absence or mutilation of your wife and children, by the question of if your apathy is heartfelt or a defense mechanism to protect you from a remorse or sorrow that you are unable to express except mutated into external issues, bless you, and by my feeling that I have both delivered and not delivered the pizza I came to deliver. Don't blow your nose in those tissues; they're crusty with semen samples.

The smell of burning hair curls away. You recover your senses. Backlogged language runs from your mouth like snot from your nose.

-- Were you burning my hair to determine its caloric content or to destroy evidence or to determine its chemical composition? Because if your purpose was the latter and not the in-betweener or the former, you should invest in an infrared spectrometer. Gas chromatography and mass spectrometry are also non-destructive, recommended techniques for chemical analysis, or you could use a scanning electron microscope, which you must have secreted in this ambulance somewhere if you call yourself a forensic scientist, equipped with an energy dispersive spectroscope. Although if the second and third purposes were joint purposes, a spectroscopic analysis would be acceptable, and you are to be

commended for your multi-tasking. Regardless, I advise you to check the seals of your apparatus. You are leaking fumes to the environment, perhaps making your analysis inaccurate due to decreased chemical concentration. If your purpose was the first and second purposes unified, then a calorimeter is the recommended tool, and my above advice holds. If your purpose was the first and not the second, and regardless of the third, I don't know what to tell you, I don't know of a non-destructive method for determining energy content of an object. And if your purpose was tertiary, triune, threefold, then there must be a method of analysis for you, technology has surely by now solved this material composition issue, this composition and destruction issue, technology solves all issues –

-- Bless you. I wasn't burning your hair. I was immolating it. A rebellion against hidden finance charges and CEO compensation and false advertising and automatic renewals and planned obsolescence through incessant upgrades and the commodification of happiness and attention and air quality and intellectual investigation and emotional wellbeing, which is possibly undesirable, and everything else. An activism against corporate subjugation and law-abiding repression and capitalism's oppression by the illusion of choice and communism's oppression by the elimination of choice, against economy and therefore against material existence. A candle lit in the dark night of the ambulance where I save what little battery life remains for scientific analysis and ethical contemplation. An idle thing done while my mind was elsewhere, while fingers fidgeted a lighter or absent-mindedly flicked match against book, an accident, an unintention, a meaninglessness, a metaphysical nod to the flame, a discovery that you're allergic to burning hair. A defiance. A denial.

-- Of what?

-- Shutup. That's like asking, Why?

-- You burned my hair. It was evidence.

-- It'll grow back, you can't help it, unlike your family, unlike the disappeared, unlike the dead, unlike Trayvon Martin or Rodney King or Tamir Rice or _____ or MLK or slaves in the Atlantic or Poland's Jews or Palestinians or Stalin's comrades or the Cherokee or the Lakota Sioux or the Tutsi or the prisoners of the Khmer Rouge or the former residents of Hiroshima or the former residents of Nagasaki, unlike the economically downtrodden and societally abandoned upon whom you've walked to arrive here. We're so fucking swimming in DNA samples that the hair is unnecessary and redundant and distracting and digressive. Hence my baldness. Let's get to it, my attention span's deficitting and when that happens, if anything happens, you know what happens. Let's try DNA to counter my insipient depression and specify guilt.

-- Shouldn't we check fingerprints first?, you suggest.

-- Thank you and welcome to the investigation, Mr. Dead Weight. There have been certifiable advancements in technique that lift dactyloscopy from the subjective black magic of hair analysis and, to name another example, forensic odontology (specifically bite analysis in our case, odontology in general being inapplicable in identifying victims lacking heads), into the rarefied objective guilt assessment (uncertainty and relativity incur the same disdain in the forensic as the fictional sciences) of corporate and governmental surveillance applications such as realtime facial recognition systems and the storage of all electronic data you produce (calls, texts, search histories, grammar mistakes, receipts, status updates, clicks, I was here's, you bought this, read that ...) in a bunker in Nevada for safekeeping and fine sifting and internal assessing and one fine day for self-purification. Also, now that your fingerprints are intellectual property (like copyrighted DNA sequences and patented, naturally occurring genes) available for purchase or claim by the pharmaceutical industry or agri-chemical companies or tech industry, all of which invest heavily in research and development to ease your hardships and augment your titillations and funnel your money into the society ameliorating economic whirlpool or centrifuge or grist mill or cement mixer, fingerprinting is now a socially responsible pastime. Dactyloscopy has returned to its formerly esteemed position as the premier method for identifying identity, a position it never lost (tens of thousands of fingerprints, that is people, are added to fingerprint repositories daily in America alone and fingerprint examination outnumbers all other forensic casework combined ((including the application of phrenology and the watching of CSI)) despite the haters and the doubters and the misidentifications and the wrongful imprisonments), chiefly because two fingerprints have never (I repeat, Never) been found exactly identical in the history of the fingerprint, and the same cannot be said of snowflakes or short curly hairs or invisible cities or people, and I don't mean twins. I mean there are identical real people like you and me everywhere. Even the fingerprints of different fingers of the same person are not the same. Which isn't mindblowing. But consider that no two fingerprints of the same person's same finger are identical. The fingerprints you leave behind in time are each different, each unique. No matter if the fingerprints you maintain on your fingers and palms and toes and soles do not change (they don't change; your identity, your personality, your definition in radial loops and ulnar loops, plain arches and tented arches, plain whorls and accidental whorls and double whorls and peacock's eyes and composite whorls and central pocket loop whorls never fails and never improves; if you cannot already turn the double loop whorl, you will never learn no matter how much you skate; you will never apprehend

the load-bearing architecture of a tented arch if you have not already; you will never escape the behavioral pattern determined by the ulnar loops dominating your four pinkies and thumbs ((unless you or another cuts or has cut them off.))), in a series of temporally consecutive deposits of sweat and amino acids and chlorides and fatty acids and triglycerides originating primarily from the eccrine glands on the patterned friction ridges (you understand you leave a little of yourself behind on everything you touch?), or of impressions you leave in clay or grease, or of reflections you etch in blood or ink (dermatoglyphics: the study of the meaning of your inadvertent deposits and accidental impressions and abandoned reflections and unintentional patterns) (I don't speak for no reason. I don't enjoy the sound of my own voice. I don't love words.) (The etymology or whatever. Pay attention. Should I hit you in the mouth with a hammer? The fucking glyphics.), no two will be the same; the marks you leave one after the other won't be identical; they'll change over time (each deposited fingerprint, you understand, will not change over time, except to weaken, to attenuate through evaporation of aqueous fluids and degradation of organic and not to mention inorganic material ((all matter degrades)) by light and heat and time). In a sequence of your deposited images, each image will be different than the last, so that if you created a booklet of a series of prints of your index finger on cardstock, whether the time lapse be a matter of seconds or days or decades, and then flipped them rapidly, the print would move and jump and stretch and contract and oscillate and thicken and thin, fluctuating in a kind of Brownian motion except for the approximately linear time-dependent deterioration, and your inanimate excretion (your print) would come to life before your eyes. Until you reached the end of your flipbook. Each and every fingerprint you leave behind is unique (have I said that already?), an entity unto itself, unrelated to its creator (too far there, not unrelated, that would defeat the point of identification, but independent once left behind), each discarded fingerprint individualized by the random vacillations and uncontrollable variables of contact with another surface: the pliability of skin, the pressure of touch, the angle of attack, slippage, fluid, heat, the roughness and absorbency and hardness of the recipient surface, the material's atomic structure, environmental conditions, whether or not the sun is shining or it's raining or the image in discussion, your touch, was left on yet another cold and icy and dark trudge home from work. In short, there is much to admire (no, I am not a passive person) I admire much about fingerprints. I collected a number of yours to blow up to poster size to decorate the ceiling of my laboratory (for the purely aesthetic reasons of patterns and labyrinths; this is not a come on or a display of affection or an attachment to you or your touch) alongside the skull and crossbones and whatnot. Fingerprints are reproductions

of ourselves shed without intention (are you listening?). These narrativeless records are shed like skin cells by you and me and everyone; data surrounds us like dark matter, imperceptible but thick as quarks on every surface; our discarded molecules contaminate all objects with our signature (I was here!), your unintelligible story writ illegibly in vanishing ink in loops and whorls and arches, your print aching to fluoresce under our light, longing for a chemical developer to contrast your residue against our background, yearning for a powder dusting to make you visible to our naked eye, for the aspirational relief of becoming finally an image (an image of you), and then the quantum relief of your characteristics being measured (numbers more uniquely you than any photograph of your face), and the communal relief of your characteristics entered into a database of millions of other individuals' distinct prints, and finally the mathematic relief of being the numbers without the image now, liberated from visual and material representation, you are the numbers that make you you compared to the numbers that make them them. Working secretively or in the digital background or subconsciously this whole time, the comparative print analysis program (whether human or computer), numb from robotically searching millions of recorded, minutely differentiated numbers, exhausted by the repetition and lack of distinction and storylessness of the prints, forlorn with the slow degradation (digital erosion) of these neverending individual histories and the incessant computational upgrades with which the print analysis program must reinvent itself and the gnawing irrelevancy of its field of expertise and expression, stops short and proclaims A NEAR MATCH! in a fit of artistic and scientific epilepsy, lights flashing, trumpets blowing, people cheering wildly. If such an event is not a figment of the imagination. Indeed, the analysis of fingerprints is an art, and therein lies its downfall. You may not have understood before that this is a eulogy, but that is only because I have framed it for you to feel the loss fully. Fingerprint analysis will never (I repeat, Never) be as precise or valid or reliable as DNA profiling. Despite all the identifying numbers, in the final comparison an expert must compare the images. Dactyloscopy is human, rather than whatever is the opposite of human: certain, doubtless, exact, perfect, complete, all. Even with the advent of digital photography, image-refining software, increased measurement resolution, automation, computational prowess, the database of searchable identities, the continued development of the perhaps ill-fated biometric fingerprint image acquisition for use in automated fingerprint authentication systems, and the refining of laboratory techniques for reading prints on objects appropriated from a crime scene (ninhydrin, diazafluorenone, ethylcyanoacrylatepolymerisation, vaccum metal deposition, argon ion lasers, fluorescence), which have enabled the capture of prints (up to

50% of the possible) that would have previously been undetectable, the people demand DNA profiling. They choose its accuracy and artlessness. In this choice we see evidence of the CSI effect (brainwashing and longing for thoughtlessness) and man's quest for complete truth (curiosity and longing for total knowing). A further tragedy is that fingerprinting is more often than not not a parallel means of identification, not a corroborating or collaborating technique, not a sidekick to DNA profiling, but perpendicular or antagonistic or antithetical to genetic fingerprinting; the two cannot coexist. In identification there is either science or art, human or inhuman, subjective or objective. Ignore that science can be subjective and art inhuman, as you ignore most else; I made a mistake offering three choices rather than one, muddying the dichotomy in a futile and incomplete gesture at completeness. Chemical fingerprint developers often (more often than not?, note my scientific-forensic-speak of uncertainty) degrade genetic material, and swabbing for deposited genetic material smears fingerprints. A choice must be made early in the investigation, a choice from which there is no return, a choice that could potentially determine the outcome of your inquiry, which criminal is incarcerated, which motive actualized, which existence bettered, a choice whose results you cannot validate with the unchosen technique or endorse beyond doubt though you compute probabilities until you vomit, a choice between genetic fingerprinting or fingerprinting. And though it saddens to no end, you, collectively, or I, personally, or we, as one, chose DNA over fingerprints. For that reason, we will not be analyzing your fingerprints here today. I apologize. I wish we could as much as you. (And we could, because of the unprecedented mass mess of fingerprints and genetic material left at the crime scene, there's plenty for all, but I said we must make a choice to prove a point, so a choice I, you, we have made.) We'd have a higher probability of epiphany, if such an ecstasy of the mind isn't too explicit, if not a higher probability of discovering the truth. Also, look at your fingertips tapping on the armrest, fondling the rivets on the exposed interior of this vehicular laboratory, caressing the instruments including but not limited to the stereomicroscope and SEM and comparison microscope, clutching the mug of coffee I provide you to keep you attentive and engaged, physically deforming my wet clay dioramas of the crime scenes, pressing into the ink pad and leaving a sloppy, undulating, unserif-ed, abstract and ultimately imageless print trail in my notebook.

You realize you are being addressed. You return to here and now and take a moment to grasp her last words before they evaporate.

-- Sorry, my attention span. When I get bored I touch things. Just like you said about yourself. Did you say that about yourself? It doesn't matter, does it? We're not so different, even if you are bald and a woman and like to talk

elaborately, and me not at all. Like you, I touch things, and that we share this connection, that we are not solely individuals, consoles me more than --

-- Fuck your feelings. I didn't bring you into my private dwelling for you to share your feelings, your whorish words, your prostitution of facts and philandering emotions and soiling of doves and sunshine and open spaces, the mendacity of saying a single goddamn word, the silence of a scream. You are not here to express redundant despondency or absence of meaning or the hoax of choice or the impossibility of being present or the rewriting of the past or the hopelessness of the future or the worthlessness of life: these are not alibis. They are not motives. No, they are motives, or they should be. The question is what do they motivate you to do, love more or less? construct or destroy? create or kill? scream or shut the fuck up? What they are not are reasons. No, no, they are reasons in that they're excuses, self-justifications, like most reason, which therefore justify nothing. What I said was, Look at your fingertips.

-- Nothing there.

-- Precisely. No topography, no ridge, no relief. Nothing. A congenital condition called adermatoglyphia, or immigration delay disease: the absence of fingerprints. Only four families have been verified with this condition as of the date of this report. Unless you have a different genetic disorder such as Naegeli-Franceschetti-Jadassohn syndrome or dermatopathia pigmentosa reticularis, both of which are forms of ectodermal dysplasia. You do have thin hair. And your skin pigment is perhaps reticular if largely indescribable. Though you sweat plenty. Who gives a shit about my diagnosis of what your conditions are? The point is, you have no fingerprints.

-- Then who am I?

-- I no longer know.

-- Suggestions?

-- I'm torn between you as Nobody and you as Everyman. Something in between is likely but messy and lacking clarity while wanting elegance. That you are short on personality, characteristics, and identity, we are certain. Note the Unsuccessful Fingerprint Collection (recall my well-made choice), which in my journal reads There Were No Prints. Of relevance: I am no slouch at fingerprint collection. I trained myself by collecting the prints off my person of unknown men who touched me without permission, whom I subsequently identified and upon whom I enacted pizza girl (sausage, pepperoni, Canadian bacon, or anchovy) justice. Meanwhile, you lack fingerprints.

-- More circumstantial evidence! you cry, or something approximating a cry, you deduce, noting the exclamation point self-consciously.

-- What would evidence that's not circumstantial be? Experiencing the act?

Committing it? Being the victim? Witnessing the act? An account of the circumstances in a diary by an eyewitness? Isn't that a second order source? All evidence can be circumstantially explained with probabilities. We are circumstantial evidence of our existence; our circumstances seed our political and religious and philosophical and economic and amorous predilections; our lives circumstantiate our deaths. We hope. We --

Defiant despite your foreboding, with a dash of fictional verve you yank up your woolen sleeve to expose your veins --

-- Bring on the DNA profiling.

-- Brought. Used the pubic hair you thought I plucked for hair analysis and immolation. Sorry or not for the pain, had to get the root and its genetic material. You get to decide why I didn't instead swab orally or rectally. I don't care, though I commit no action without reason. 99.9% of your DNA sequence is identical to everybody's. One difference lies in the highly variable Short Tandem Repeats (STRs) (also known as microsatellites) from the non-coding intron regions. STRs are short repetitions of DNA bases (the genetic alphabet: A [adenine], C [cytosine], G [guanine], T [thymine]) that neither code for a protein nor provide instructions on where transcription of DNA or the translation of proteins should begin or end. Fully 98% of the human genome is non-coding, and I tell you nothing without reason. The ideal length of an STR for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis of your genetic fingerprint is four or five letters long; shorter lengths suffer from PCR stutter and preferential amplification; longer lengths suffer from environmental degradation and underprivileged PCR amplification. The number of repetitions within each STR locus is different from person to person (polymorphic), though possible alleles of each are counterintuitively limited. Bluntly, each allele is typically shared by 5-20% of individuals. Which is to say there is a chance between 1 in 20 and 1 in 5 that you possess any given allele at a specific STR site found in the population. Which is also to say chances are you share a certain STR allele with between 5 and 20 people out of 100. You are capable of extrapolating these probabilities for populations of 1000, 10,000, 100,000, 1,000,000, 10,000,000, 100,000,000, 1,000,000,000, etc. Note that the observed population of our narrative can be rounded to 10 without introducing any more error than was already inherent in our calculations. Again, extrapolate. The best estimate of our population is open to interpretation. You may estimate our population to be 1, which is a legitimate estimate, but an estimation of 1 is ill-advised unless fractions give you pleasure or you have a unique facility with decimals or the avoidance of natural numbers is inherent in your metaphysic or you are binary. Your estimations and extrapolations are merely to improve your grasp of the situation; accuracy in the

number of people in our story is irrelevant. At STR loci, the slightly diverse genetic junk words are repeated hundreds of time, and how many times each useless gibberish is repeated at each site is what differentiates you from you. STR analysis determines how much your genetic nonsense repeats itself. Do I need to say it again? STR analysis accumulates its true statistical power and depth of insight into identity as site after site, locus after locus, short tandem repeat after short tandem repeat are discriminated by the quantity of repeated gobbledegook dominating the genetic instructions of your life. You repeat your nonsense so many times at this site, which isn't that unique, but when you take into account that you also repeat your blah blah blah so many times at this place, and your stuttered rubbish so many times at that site, and your futile genetic plea so many times here, and your redundant inveighing so many times there, and your banal chortle so many times way over there, and your obnoxious hiccup so many times right fucking here, and your nonfunctional biological scream so many times way down in there, and the same incompetent thought over and over and over so many times right in the middle of here, and the same genetic junk word in the same four-lettered language that you try to beat into a greater meaning in what you pray is a more significant language so goddamn many times in this location, and your useless nonsense so many times at this locus, and your useless nonsense so many times at this locus, and your useless nonsense so many times at this locus, you become unique. STR analysis at 13 loci is standard operating procedure to acquire unique identity. When we apply the product rule of probabilities to theorize the probability of a perfect match between 2 distinct sets of 13 loci, the chance is for some reason as much as 1 in a quintillion (1×10^{18}). It doesn't add up, but that's what it says. OR. It doesn't add up, but that's life. You choose the sentence. There haven't been near that many people in the history of people (and there probably will never be, at least what we'd define as people, and/or it'll be an incomprehensible number of years in the future). Which is morale-boosting in our attempt to determine your specific identity, if perhaps a smidge unrealistic; we all have an intrinsic emotional understanding of our fundamental ununiqueness and basic sameness that shouldn't be disregarded because of science (recall these statistics refer to a match of useless repeated nonsense junk DNA). It's only reasonable that sometime in recorded history (the time since when biological evolution has debatably stalled) someone has shared the same number of dumb repetitions at these 13 STR sites. In order for this probability to correlate more closely with our experience, intuition, and ineffable sense of the meaning of life, which we have unwittingly developed and unconsciously nourished as a coping mechanism against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we will slightly reduce the probability of a perfect match to a

more realistic 1 in 10 trillion (1×10^{13}), via a more intellectually comprehensible and emotionally logical if perhaps scientifically arbitrary 1 in 10 chance of a perfect match between different individuals at each site, multiplied 13 times for 13 sites. 10 trillion has the advantage of being somewhat more conceivable by our contemporary consciousness than quintillion, as 10 trillion is the same order of magnitude as the American national debt, only one hundred times larger than the estimated number of humans who have ever lived, approximately the number of human cells in a human body, and a full tenth of the number of bacteria in your body. Nevertheless this indiscriminately reasoned statistical power of discrimination is not considered statistically supportable by the statisticians among us because monozygotic twins, who share more DNA than unprotected lovers on a weekend escape to the sea or the mountains or the woods, make up 0.2% of the population (and I'm not talking about twins when I talk about the uniqueness and conformity of your identity, and we will not fall back on the subjectivity of fingerprints to individualize you when you have none) and because of the unavoidability of laboratory error both human and systemic, such as irregularities in the argon gels of electrophoresis that might reduce the discrimination of allele quantity or a factory lab worker in an exotic or developing foreign land contaminating cotton swabs used in DNA sample collection by, what, using the q-tips in his or her ear? by breathing on them? by wrapping it in one of their own short and curlies? The fact is that the blame is most likely to be found close to home. The risk of sample contamination from genetic material on nearby objects at a crime scene, or from investigators, or from the residue of prior tests on lab equipment, but especially from the victim when the samples are collected from the victim's person or the victim's residence or any object that came into contact with the victim is significantly greater than the chance of contamination from some indigent lab rat underpaid by our economic standards. It remains to be seen if the implementation of our standards would improve their lives as determined by, for example, the measurement of happiness in a farflung country which you know next to nothing about and for the people of which you estimate you have a very low probability of accurately estimating happiness (to begin with you don't know what happiness is to you, let alone them) unless you say all people are the same.

--Nevermind probability, get it over with.

-- I'm just not going to go into how I isolated the DNA from your sample and the crime scene samples. For the love of all things fucking holy I have a life to live and your violating need to understand your predicament, to read explicating words and watch expletiving entertainment and experience exonerating enlightenment, to hear the same thing said differently or said the same while you

wait expectantly for something to happen to you, to comprehend the scientific processes of your incipient incarceration, while tortuous will not make me scream. I will not allow it and Jesus it's getting late like always and I can smell my vivacity and words and verdict rotting, so shut the hell up and try to listen for once so we can get this over with and move on. The DNA is in a buffer solution laced with divalent and monovalent cations such as magnesium and potassium ions, and Taq polymerase to do the dirty work of replication, and dinucleotide primers of 3-base-pair length complimentary to the termini of the sense and antisense strands of the target STR to instruct the polymerase where to do the dirty deed, and deoxynucleoside triphosphates to be the dirty building blocks of this grotesque amplification of a repetitious fragment of useless genetic sequence in which millions of copies of a useless fragment of the code for life are generated in order to create or fabricate enough useless fragments to be statistically viable and scientifically inviolable and especially visible in argon gel. Test tubes are inserted into that thermal cycler, which cycles thermally by raising and lowering the temperature. Using, you know, electricity or something, which we conserve by working or whatever you call this, investigating, in the dark. The temperature is raised to near boiling, denaturing the DNA strands, melting the, no, sorry, the fluidity of words again, breaking the hydrogen bonds between complimentary bases, unzipping the double-stranded DNA like pants to create single-stranded orphans. The temperature is lowered: the primers anneal to their target sites, finding them as if by magnetism, but not, more like by the mechanism by which humans find mates, not mates, love, not love, by the random bumping in the night until we find a place that fits, fitting into their match on the long mindless history-riddled junk-littered sporadically useful, integral, or elegant living fossil that is the shuffled repetition of our 4-letter genetic alphabet. The Taq polymerase enzyme, designed by the bacteria *Thermus aquaticus* and put to industrial use by *Homo sapiens sapiens*, binds to the primer template and begins to synthesize the new DNA chain to complement the old. During this elongation, the temperature is raised to optimize the performance of the polymerase, which will as a rule-of-thumb polymerize 1000 bases per minute (Can you do that? Your cells can and do regularly, constantly, even now, but you cannot.). After a time designated to allow the transcription of the entire STR, the cycle is repeated: heat, cool, heat; denature, anneal, elongate. The target DNA is doubled at each iteration, translated in exponential amplification, mathematized and liberated from words if not symbols by the equation $Y=Y_0(2^n)$ ($n = \#$ of repetitions of the denature, anneal, elongate series; $Y_0 = \text{initial } \# \text{ of copies of target DNA}; Y = \text{resultant copies of targeted DNA}$). (A

very simple equation; this is not calculus or diff-eq or tensors or building a piano; it's replicating the genetic code.) 20-40 cycles is within the normal bounds for PCR. As you can calculate of your own volition, if we began with 1 copy of an STR and ran it through 40 cycles of PCR [$Y=1(2^{40})$], we would produce 1.10×10^{12} copies, approximately a trillion for point of reference if words appease you more than numbers of reprehensible or awe-inspiring or frightening or belittling quantities, if all goes well, don't let me get colloquial, assuming 100% reaction efficiency, a bad assumption, but a better assumption in this chemical process than in a mechanical one (even if the synthesis of the new strand by the polymerase is in a sense mechanical: the building of the compliment for both the sense and antisense strands, how the enzyme bends and folds into a functional tertiary structure with hollows and rises, cupping nucleotide constituents, bending and folding around, slipping over, sliding along the single strand like aerial artists performing on their rope or a private in basic training mounting a fissured tower or a stripper snaking up a pole, like a woman and a man or a man and a man or a woman and a woman, I'm sorry one of my few weaknesses is the conflation of cellular reproductive biology and sex, the nucleotides cobbled together just so, no not roughly and hastily and shoddily but as if by a cobbler, the protein bringing the newly formed nucleotides into tentative contact with the nascent DNA strand in just the position, the orientation, to facilitate their coupling, their mating, their puzzle pieces piecing together and then moving to the next pair and thus elongating our strand and eventually completing the double strand and releasing the conjoined to twist on itself in a momentary double helix before it is again denatured). Needless to say, between your hair roots and the quantities of blood and semen and whatnot samples, we began with considerably more than single DNA strands. We have a lot of DNA. No matter how minuscule it looks in the test tube. Molecules are small. At the scale of molecules, chemistry is mechanics. If not quantum mechanics. I know I negate myself, but that doesn't make me false. The process is so mechanical as to render me pointless or absent or automated except for those rare times when I can still get excited by the mechanism (genetic reproduction, mechanically coerced). The amplification is mechanical, the laboratory procedure mechanical, laborious explanation mechanical, identification mechanical, STR DNA PCR mechanical, you (bioelectrochemicalquantumnewtonian) mechanical. For fuck's sake mechanical progress if nothing: one can then separate and detect the different lengths of the STRs using gel electrophoresis or capillary electrophoresis. As for the latter, I've had enough of electro-osmotic flow beyond my power to stop or increase

through narrow, confined, friction-dominated capillary-like tubes or pipes or tunnels, I desire trenches or channels or ditches in gel open to the sky, my god this medium is viscous and you have a very large Stokes radius, yes much too much of a hydrodynamic radius for movement through my slender capillaries. Maybe that's why you, I, we are getting nowhere. And maybe that's why I default to innuendo, a grasp for joy in repeated sequences of stagnant moments. So I'm going to use gel electrophoresis because it'll be better. Besides, I have fond memories of the wiggle of agarose gel while performing gel electrophoresis in high school and first (first? ha ha!) experiencing the frustration of achieving inconsistent, unexpected, inexplicable, unreproducible, and incorrect results in a controlled laboratory environment. The gel I have here quivering in my hand is probably agar, but perhaps polyacrylamide if your, I mean the samples', STR sequences are too short despite their aforementioned girth, but -- Look, it wiggles like jello! Shut up Viola. We have so much more DNA than we know what to do with. Get control Viola. And we have quivering gel. I know the gel excites you Viola but now is not the time to undergo mitosis or replication or personality bifurcation or whatever, now is not the time to listen to the tick of your biological clock, now is not the time to divide and address yourself and end up a couple of jiggling undressed messes on the laboratory table, you have a purpose here, a job, something worthwhile to do when there's so little -- I'll undo when undoing does me good (you can go back to being a parenthetical). I don't obey and I'm not obeying now, but I am placing the gel in which we will commit gel electrophoresis in what in creative writing (no more in, please) we call a gel electrophoresis chamber, which is just this clear plastic box connected to a battery. The gel is sectioned into lanes. At one end are wells into which DNA in a buffer solution is deposited via micropipette. In one lane is a pre-purchased control solution (molecular weight and size marker), which consists of molecules of known sizes and weights, which will calibrate distances from the origin by marking on the gel the distribution of those sizes and weights. I turn the power on. The negatively charged DNA is moved by the electromotive force toward the anode. The smaller (shorter) the DNA chain, the further it will move toward the anode. The larger (longer) the chain, the less. This has to do with mass to charge ratios and pore size in the gel and yes friction, that limiter and enabler you cannot escape but still how the medium wiggles to dispense with the parentheticals momentarily. The ambulance wiggles. Doesn't the clear gel through which the DNA sieves reduce your claustrophobia? The STR sequences, which dominate our samples due to the PCR amplification, migrate in parallel lanes along our gel and collect in bands. The lengths of the STRs can be read by comparing the location of their bands to the bands created by the control marker,

as I said earlier when I used the future tense so confidently. But more important than determining the actual lengths of your STRs is the pattern created by your 13 samples in the gel: a scatter of 13 dark ovals, one to a row, like a punch card for the original computers. Our own unique punch card that defines us is fed into a mainframe filling several rooms, an entire building, ingesting our instruction, our condition, our experience -- apologies. Genetic profiling. Your identification. You cannot see the bands. Be patient. I stain the grooves with the dye EtBr and place the gel in a light box and turn on the ultraviolet light (thank you for pinching the bulb from your truncated neighbor) ... How the bands glow red orange pink, like solitary neon lights in the now deep purple oceanic abyss of the gel. The image is captured digitally by a computer (the camera eye there, in the light box). The captured image, never to be released, is analyzed by the image analysis software. The process is almost completely automated. I have nothing to do with it, except to tell you what's happening. To relate what's occurring. To verbalize. The software compares locations and intensity of the bands with those of other samples, etc. While the program works, even though it's already done, for effect then, let's visually examine the photograph of your STR pattern, your genetic fingerprint, against that of the blood, semen, flesh chunks, and whatnot. An overlay of one image over the other, and another, and another, and yes yes beautiful! And here in this gel, I placed the entire collection of your 13 STRs in one lane and that of the blood, semen, and whatnot collected upstairs in three others and ran them parallel and yes! yes! yes! And here, comparing your sample to the blood, flesh chunks, and whatnot downstairs -- amazing! And with the genetic dust samples from the statue of you next door -- no one's given me an epiphany before! I'm not naturally exclamatory but you you you, you do this to me and thank you. Look, listen, feel, the computer spits out reams of numbers under columns of you, blood, flesh chunks, semen, stone, and whatnot, and I don't have any fucking idea what they mean but my god they are the same thank you after all this time, the waiting pays off, there is a reason for the electromotives, Yes! I finally know you, understand you, identify with you after enduring the drudgery, the computation, the automation, the mechanism, after suffering the neglect of the top-down economics of free will, choice, and capital, the capacity to self-actualize, after persevering like a limp rag wrung through soul-leaching repetitions, after experiencing what it's like to want to die and even to die a little but to be attached to life support and forced to continue against my will, and conscious no less, as much as anyone, to take the inputs of information to which I did not consent and then to be bled away in a stream of symbols coagulating into thoughts whose sum is insufficient to express what lies behind or before or beside or beneath or be-, or maybe the inadequacy can be

explained by the absence of anything before the words (coma), the thoughts (vegetative state), the emotions (oblivion); perhaps before the words thoughts emotions there is nothing; what if there is nothing before the _____ until you become your words (is that my great discovery, why I was put into this world, that for which you have suffered and will be remembered?) and give them reality: the bands, the numbers, the neon glow, the punch cards, the genetic fingerprint, the coiling double helix, the blood and semen and flesh chunks and dust and whatnot, the short and curly, the short tandem repeats, the actions, the cations, the atrocities, the words, the murder, the passages, the scream is -- You. A perfect match. A term without uncertainty, a certainty without credence due to comingled probabilities, an indefinite article of faith made definite, the classification when you hate boxes, an untruth, the truth: The Perfect Match.

You're flustered. You're a rat cornered behind the woodpile. Viola is between you and the rear door of the ambulance. She is removing the wood one piece at a time. She is more than capable of kicking the shit out of you. She brandishes a broken ax handle as a spear. The woodpile shrinks. You cower. The light comes closer and shines brighter:

-- You are the murderer: your bootprints flee your neighbor's house and your biometrics are almost a match to those required to disperse the Medusa siren's blood in the aesthetically pleasing arc on the wall, and are an exact match if you stood in front of the headless statue of you, bracing against it for support, or perhaps the statue was a shadow of you cast by her luminosity and freed of need for body or surface by your deed but turned to stone by her scream, or perhaps it is an afterimage of you, a rock dust likeness blown behind you by her sonic eruption when you decapitated her with your dull walking stick, or perhaps it's nothing more than an imperfectly placed effigy sculpted classically headless as a clue. No matter, the coincidences are too many, and there's a blade in your walking stick. The cat hair upstairs enigmatically and genetically matches your own. Your head shape confirms that you are desirous, indiscrete, desperate, despairing, and degenerate, and the image of the person-like being in a quantum suicide box on the handheld touchscreen device strongly resembles you except as twisted by your morbid imagination, and to reiterate you left behind a headless nude statue of yourself in your neighbor's house. My god, the ego, the symmetry, the depravity, the stupidity, the elegance, how fitting together the puzzle pieces satisfies, how divine to form this picture of you. You transfused your blood into those children's veins; that's how you killed them if they existed. Their blood samples are not a perfect match for yours but they are remarkably similar. You thought their blood would mask the murder weapon: your blood. You only flayed and dismembered postmortem to distract me. You used their

antibody reaction to your blood to kill them by anaphylactic shock. Have you ever seen someone who died of anaphylactic shock of the circulatory system? Silence won't save you. The answer is No, because either you didn't go upstairs with me and we did not witness it, which begs the question how I know what I know but I say unto you as a scientist that one need not see a thing to know it, or you did but could not bring yourself to look for very long while I investigated. Not counting what you saw when you did it, which you probably do not recall. Whether we found those small, not yet fully formed bodies or not, you did what you did. The possibility that I did not find them is a procedural technicality. The swelling, the distension, the engorgement (try to imagine), they no longer resembled themselves but you. And the mother if there was one was full of you. And every sample from He in the Chair, from crusty lopped fingers to spew to hair roots to blood on the cigar cutter to dentition marks around the ear to excrement in bottles to handwriting snippets to innumerable DNA assays, matches you. Which might cause me to regress to an explanation of sample contamination by the most likely source, the first victim, He in the Chair. It was after all his house and his family and his neighbor's Medusa and a neighborhood cat, except how could you have been so completely contaminated by him that the genetic fingerprints I took from your pants match his? Or how could you have so thoroughly contaminated him that all of him bears your genetic signature? The simplest explanation is that you are murderer and murdered. The only difficulty is that he is dead and you cower before me, apparently alive. But being alive is a subjective condition, and trembling is no hard evidence of it. Not to mention you previously confessed to being He in the Chair. I take you at your word; you seem if nothing else a person of integrity.

You are. You are not, you think, capable of doing what's been done.

-- You've proven nothing. Yes, I am the man dead in the Lay-Z-Boy. And those are, were, if there were children, my children upstairs. Of course their blood was thick with mine, which, it's true, may have unfortunately proven to be their downfall. And that may or may not have been my wife you may or may not have found upstairs, my possible wife who like my possible children I futilely shielded with uncertainty but was unable to protect with comprehensive existencelessness from the unblinking unspoken everpresent eyes I feel even now watching me. In that, I am a failure and have no further reason and less desire to continue existing myself. -- You pause. Your breath is hard to catch. -- My only solace is that, as you overshared, I was, am within my perhaps wife, and that the possible children were indeed and by blood mine. My only hope is that my negligible seed lives on in the afterlife, that instead of disassociating into oneness or dissolving into nothingness, one undiscovered country is Egyptian

and you can take it with you and my wife of some probability, the one who went to the Egyptian undiscovered country, already grows thick around the waist from my trifling presence and pendulous of the breast in anticipation of my arrival, her hips spread like wings to bear me, our young to hold the hands of our old beyond the river in another of many worlds. -- Embarrassed, you cry in public on these pages and in private with Viola in the ambulance. -- I give you my word, I am not who killed them.

-- And what of the suicide handheld touchscreen device? And the headless Medusa? And your headless statue? And your headless neighbor? Explain that, Storyteller.

-- I, I cannot. But about that cat --

-- Don't explain the cat. Explain the death of your wife and children.

-- Didn't I?

-- No. You expressed solace and hope, both useless in this investigation, and seemed to claim that your blood inexplicably and spontaneously boiled in your children's veins. You offered no counter explanation on the death of your wife. Meanwhile you continued to cast doubt on their existence.

-- Is that not illuminating?

-- Yes, it is. What happened?

-- I, I don't recall.

-- Was it not you who ordered the pizza, and are thus in debt to me?

-- I ... I remember thinking about ordering a pizza ... did I?

-- And what of the scream you and you alone heard?

-- I cannot say. I'm only a man, you say. I've been known to scream, you cannot say. A figment of imagination, maybe? A cancerous bleep, a genesis gone astray, consuming us, the genetics of a story gone viral, self-perpetuating, you don't know if you say.

You have never been more lonely. Did you slaughter the loves of your life? And a neighbor you never knew, and a beautiful hideous mythical creature, and a fantastical ghoulish humanoid who looks vaguely familiar but whom you can't place in the handheld suicide device? You've given your word.

-- And what of the you dead and tortured, atrophied and bedsore, spark extinguished but kept debatably alive by the pneumatic cuffs around the calves for your experiment? And what of your certifiable thoughts mapping all we've undergone on post-its? And what of the vessels emptied down your throat? Who did us the service of eating your ear and pouring in ants so you'd hear no more screams, of cutting off your right-hand fingers so you could no longer write, of waterboarding you so you'd understand and in the end die the death you imposed on others? Who killed you to liberate us?

-- ... some nobody did it. Yes, fine, I adulterated the samples. I couldn't help myself, couldn't keep my hands off them, had to touch everything, like a four year old. I needed the last touch of my children; I mixed my blood with theirs but it did not resurrect them. I missed the unseen presence of my neighbor; I petted his cat so forcefully that I inadvertently spliced in my DNA. I wanted the medusa siren; I cannot be prosecuted for decapitating a horrifying, stunning myth mishmash whose purpose was to seduce me. I needed to fiddle or interact with the invented man in the handheld touchscreen suicide device; when was the last time you resisted the temptation to toy with your device? I am sorry for suiciding a character who doesn't exist and whom I created with nebulous motive. I needed my wife -- No, not even you can think of it, the act as reprehensible as, no, perhaps desecrating the dead is not quite as dehumanizing as desecrating the living. -- The character, the nobody in the handheld suicide device, he did it, he killed me and my possible family and I trapped him in that piece of technology as retribution. But look now at the screen: the box is empty. You let him escape. It's your fault and -- and you realize as Viola listens, really listens, if your character did it and you created him as you implied and your notes indicate, you share culpability with your creation, if not the culpability of the puppeteer then that of the inventor of the atomic bomb, of the gun manufacturer, of the parent whose child shoots up a school in a mass murder-suicide, or else grows into a financial officer who gambles with people's lives and other chimeras, or else invents atrocity-imbued worlds laced with the suffering of the collective imagination. -- Nevermind. I am a chimera in every sense of the word. I bear two or more sets of genes, one of the rarest of genetic mutations. I am a nonexistent fire-breathing she-monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. Bellerophon, from his winged-horse Pegasus, shot a block of lead into my throat with his spear from a great distance, the coward, and thought himself a god because I suffocated on the lead made molten by my hot breath. I am a figment of your imagination, an illusory byproduct of your electrochemical mind, a dream of your subconscious. -- It's as if she's in your head as she sits legs crossed between you and the back door, silent, doodling on her skin with a needle, inking tears, listening. If you're a match, you're a match, and there you are. No matter how many different versions of genetic material you host, no matter how much of an everyman you are. And if you are a fearsome mutant amalgamation comeback from the mythological grave to cause suffering and be a force of entropy, what would be more noble than to for once tangibly reduce misery and increase happiness by removing you from the population? And if you are a product of her imagination, a pollution of our mind, a manifestation of your id, then what more therapeutic action for you,

what way to more increase our oneness, how to more completely complete her than by excising you? You you you framed me. -- Your survival instinct is dying. -- Any undergraduate in a biological specialty can manufacture DNA. You blackmailed me for unknowingly ordering pizza and then going outside to leer at you while you rang my bell. You murdered me and my loved ones and several bystanders for what you wrongly assumed was prank calling you about a never-screamed scream. You inculpated me for these ideas, thoughts, feelings, words that are useless and probably detrimental to the public good. You scapegoated me for releasing the scream that is in all of your souls, for torturing you with your labyrinthine story, for illusioning you with choice and eluding you now, for informing you that it is you who by reading this and making your choices and taking part and living your story has beheaded my ecstasy-addicted neighbor, killed the pained beauty of the medusa and silenced the one siren to whom we could unequivocally sacrifice ourself, turned me to stone, suicided my visions in your handheld device that you cannot stop touching, that has become your appendage, raped my maybe wife, slaughtered my possible innocent children, and tortured me to death. -- She allows your reverie while she shaves her legs and her head but not her armpits. You feel no better accusing her than you would accepting personal responsibility for your action and inaction and suffering the consequences. It's no longer your innocence you're desperate to protect, but thought, perception, reason. What it means to be you; what it means to be human. You don't want reality to crumble with you. You want to salvage the world. -- Murder-suicide?

-- Go on. Don't stop now. I'm sorta listening.

-- There are many parallel worlds and they've intersected or collided or -- You hold your face in your hands. Your face is there, even if none of your explanations explain. -- Nevermind ... maybe there are and maybe there aren't ... it's irrelevant ... perhaps one version of myself, a version I care not to think of, a version I wish I could abdicate, a version filling me with aversion, a version I'd caged disgraced in the basement of my mind, a version escaped and committed these atrocities, my neighbors, the siren, my ... my ... while I sat passive, immobilized by inaction, deep in thought, writing, atrophying, spiraling downward to the inevitable terminus of questions such as Why? What for? What's the use? Why involve myself when none of this is real? ... questions that themselves are screams. ... And as I listened to them scream in unison, some other version of me, some other piece of me, some other place inside me aware of my guilt in not stopping myself, a place that believed inaction is even more pointless than action if a greater pointlessness is possible, the creative part of me perhaps, proceeded to torture myself, to feel the pain I inflicted, to make me

scream the scream I heard ... while a different version of me or another of my appendages or a chunk of the communal I also left the house to actively seek the scream, to engage you as detective, to expose my degeneracy to the wideworld, to derive a self-serving exhibitionistic expiation, to personally shame myself in public in order to feel better about myself, to absolve and if not to absolve then to silence, which is where all the yous come in, there're roles for all of you in this story, room for each of you to investigate, flagellate, castigate, to torture me, to violate the loves I have fathered and those I have not, to draw my confessional scream, which you are, incarcerate me, which you have here, and execute me, which you do one way or the other. Thank you.

-- You're welcome, but you lost me somewhere in there. Murder-suicide is a plausible explanation, but the fact remains that you remain. I don't know if the you here in the ambulance, the sweating sobbing stink of mess before me, did it, or if it was the dead you in the chair, or the you that tortured and killed that you, or if the same you murdered your family and yourself and the siren (need I again mention the cat hair or your touchscreen suicide device?). Your bootprints crisscross and swirl through the crime scene, never knowing where they're going, never proceeding linearly, never arriving. Were they all made by you, or do all of you wear the same boots? It would regardless require a suspension of disbelief for which I am ill-equipped to believe you killed yourself so decadently without your assistance. I don't know for certain if you or you or you or you did it, but you are here. There is the strong possibility there is another you if not many yous, accomplice yous, whether out there or in here, discrete or connected, scattered through time or superimposed in slight temporal offset (hence your blur). I ask you, When was the last time you had a choice, made a decision, that was more than superficial: what breakfast to eat?, what shoes to wear?, when to clip your toenails and what to do with the clippings?, what to name your child?, whether or not to have a child, to work this job or this, to read this book or that, where to live, who to be? When was the last time you made a choice that redefined you? When last did you have the opportunity to make a choice that would benefit humanity? You could rid the world of yourself.

-- Are my wife and children alive and whole and wondering where I am in some other world, waiting for some other me?

-- I don't know. If it soothes you, perhaps they wait for a you who has not done what you've done, a you who has not lived your story, a you who has not authored your life. A you who chose differently than you. But those yous are not yous we are aware of. Their existence or non-existence cannot be known; once they are known those yous become you. All we can do is what we can do in our world. I concur that as you sit before me you are incapable of having committed

these atrocities and their associated screams. Which, considering the scientific evidence, proves both that there is another you and that the other you is you. Let us capture the craven you on the loose, the you who tormented and persecuted and abused and ultimately killed you, and before that ate your ear and lopped off your fingers and sliced off your eyelids, who bored and penetrated and entered and claimed squatters' rights on you, the you who took your sole loves and reasons to live, the you who put you through all your permutations, the you who did this to you. And if that you is you, you will be doubly captured. And so I say again sidekick, let us rid the world of the author of silent screams, the probable slaughterer of your possible children, the likely assaulter of your maybe wife, the definite self-torturer, the monster who turned the siren to stone. Come with me to gather all the yous together and eliminate them, to liberate us from you, to exorcise yourself from your story. Help me catch you.

Yes, you think, my final act: self-sacrifice. What other choice do you have? You are already caught, trapped in this ambulance, in these pages. You can choose not to help Viola with what she has already accomplished and she will simultaneously execute you and subsume you (for reference, go to 128). Or you can not help and choose to fester in reflection and remorse until you turn to dust (go to 2) without redemption. Or you can end your story now, quit reading after laudable endurance, terminate your experience so near the end, go on, you've already killed your loves, there's no possibility of self-sacrifice to make your continued endurance worth it, deny absolution and shut your book or burn it alive or shoot it full of holes or piss on it or eat it, flense it like a child, make the rest of your story unreadable, decide you no longer exist, do it, stop reading, go to 198, suicide, go, stop living, there's no end, start living, there are other realities, find one, make one, be one, stop existing in the here where there's no redemption and now doing nothing and start in another here and now and do something.

Whatever you do do not end your story without destroying it. Do not hand it to another, burdening them with your identity, your actions, yourself, penetrating them, paining them, replacing their face with yours, or yours with theirs, scapegoating them, passing the blame when you could end it or at least own it. Do not foist your depravity on another. End it. You.

Or if you're too chickenshit to take your own action, to seek your own justice, to be your own person, then go with Viola, heed her, heel to her, help her turn you into a delusion of self-sacrifice, let her knock her secret knock and lead you once more through a doorway, out of the ambulance, surrender your story to her, you've botched it, ruined the potential, soiled the beauty that could have been, allow her to dig through the muck for the mythical pearl of experiential learning,

the needle in the haystack, the pea under the pillow, the scream in the night, the carrot of atonement, she'll fabricate a world in which atonement exists not as a theory or an ethical virtue or a religious ideal but as a quantifiable possibility, and in that virtual world she permits you the possibility that your wife and children if they are yours if they ever existed are not dead, she allows you to believe atonement might be unnecessary so you don't give up on her, it's possible, anything is possible, it just depends on your choices, after all you are alive and dead and dying and here and there and doing nothing and everything simultaneously, so who is to say, perhaps she who adorns herself in tears, perhaps she who is adept at piercing lips and piecing together the stutter of narrative and delivering pizzas and tying the loose ends of circumstantial evidence and repelling the propositions of pizza customers and reveling in the mystery of motive and ambivalent ambition and abject screams that proclaim our presence in the black silence and lust for the expected sunrise, screams to feel our hum and vibration, perhaps she who knits a story out of tongue-tied skeins of fraying neurons and tangled bodies. Submit to Viola. Trust that for you alone Viola will conjure a story of redemption about you for your final act of 33.

40.

You arrive in this chamber after a journey like all the rest, a journey you'd rather not recount: travails, excruciation, waiting, miscommunication, what felt like altitude sickness, thievery of your wallet, the viewing of what you were told were great works of art, gypsies duping you, stunning architecture somehow built by hand with no machines but gods and slaves, dead people supposedly in mausoleums or in boxes under stones or in the ground rotted. Missed trains, trains hurtling through tunnels, trains that kicked you off in the middle-of-nowhere because you bought the wrong ticket and don't have the right money to buy the right one or the right language to ask why the fuck the train is leaving without you or when is the next one or where will it take you. The walls are made of screens, floor to ceiling. Not window screens. Not archeological-dig-dirt-sifting screens. Computer screens. Some of which are smudged with fingerprints or dusted in dirt or snowy with static but none of which exhibit pores a fly or a dust mote or a you could pass through. One wall of screens are windows into other dark chambers dimly lit by torch light. In them is flicker. On this wall there are 19 screens of equal size and shape, squares all. The screens are not flush side-by-side, but are separated by a distance of stone. This distance is regular and, to your eyeball measurement, set at either the base distance or twice said distance. There are 5 rows of screens with, from top to bottom, 3, 5, 3, 5, and 3 screens. There are 5 columns of screens containing, from left to right, 4,

3, 5, 3, and 4 screens. The columns are separated by one base stone distance, as are the rows. Not every position in the 5x5 matrix is occupied by a screen. When you consider the arrangement as two concentric squares around a center position, which holds a screen, you observe that the vacant positions all reside in the outside square, and that the length of the sides of the outside square are twice that of the inside. None of the vacant positions are side-by-side. In the bottom-left screen is a black box theater, in the top-left an expansive gray quartered, in the top-right a splotched beige lighter and darker and ordered and cluttered like body camouflage, and in the bottom-right is you gazing into the screens, lit by screen glow rather than by torch. The remaining screens disclose dark chambers each dimly lit by a flickering torch. You are the only figure you can discern in the flickering screens, though shadows are everywhere. On the second wall is the head of a lion bigger than life, big as the wall, puzzled together by screens. The lion opens its mouth wider than you are tall and you brace yourself against its teeth or what will be an immense and fearsome roar, but no sound comes out, or if it does you can't hear it, though a phantom roar roars quietly in your mind and the mouth shuts without you in it. You exhale and discover that you weren't breathing. The close up of the lion dissolves. In the darkness, a flicker deep in the wall of screens, the lion prowling, flicker, a tiger prowling, flickers, a leopard a snow leopard a clouded leopard prowling. Every time you think of another big cat, bobcat cheetah Bengal tiger Siberian tiger lynx panther cougar puma mountain lion catamount, another flicker of blinking eyes, sabertooth tiger, a new sleek body, serval, slinking or pacing or waiting statuesquely or pouncing in the shadows of the screens. You wonder if the screens are windows onto surveillance cameras throughout the Labyrinth and these cats hunt its corridors. On a third wall is a mosaic of tight-packed screens ranging from large to small and from circular to triangular to the inescapable quadrilateral but also to irregular, curved, unnamable shapes. Through the mosaic rain breadcrumbs of letters, strings of words, the map of sentences you've left behind you, glowing green or orange or yellow or white against black backgrounds and black against white backgrounds. Sentences run from screen to screen in succession, disappearing at upper-left as new letters and punctuations emerge from a blinking cursor at lower-right, words appearing letter-by-letter as you think them, each new character pushing what came before over one space and pushing one character in the upper-left corner into oblivion, so that though your stream of words flow from left to right and up to down, if you were to read into your past, your history, your story, you would have to read backwards from right to left and down to up into oblivion. Which you can't. It makes your head hurt when you try. You can't keep up. The words are pushed left and up and away before you

can reach the moment you entered the Labyrinth, then the second chamber, then the third, etc., then this chamber. You're wired for forward and the word map is time-sensitive and incessantly even now flowing by you, disgorging its contents into a secret nowhere ocean or pit or past or landfill or nowhere displayed on no screen. Your intellect cannot catch your stream of consciousness or the map of where you've been runs through your fingers like sand leaving nothing or thoughts drain away in an electron cascade. You swing the head you tow by its dreadlocks and smash a screen. Nothing much changes. The words skip the screen you smashed. You feel no better. The fourth wall is one giant screen glowing white. Across its breadth, in a large font of your choice, is typed:

You are always within four moves of where you entered and will one day perhaps exit. You are two passages from Atlas. You are as far as you can get from the Women of Gray while still being in the Labyrinth.

If you turn north, slip forever to 165.

If you turn west, scuttle two forevers to 171.

If you turn east, then writhe 2π Forever to 35 and perceive a slow curvature like you're turning around on yourself.

In the screen you see your reflection. Your wool is worn away and you are naked and emaciated and scraped and bloody and scabbed and your hair has gone gray and a head, still covered just enough by your threadbare scarf shimmering with bits of glass to not turn you into a statue, is tied to your ankle. Your eyes are sunken. You shy away from the frightful image without moving by loosening your eyes and undoing your concentration and focusing beyond it. There, behind the reflection of you, you see reflections of the other screens and in them reflections of your screen into which you further retreat your focus and see reflections of the screens behind you and in them see reflections of the screen you face, back and forth until you spin or feel like you do, looking for a way out but there is none. You are surrounded by swirling screens. You stop spinning or stop yourself from feeling like you do. You swallow your screams at the screens. You walk around the outside of the room, running your fingers along the screens like the blind, like a toddler touching everything, like an admitted's traveling fingers, like a modern praying on his touchscreen, searching, until your fingers sink into one. You crawl in.

32. VI.

Children: Our children have voice modulation issues. And though our

children are not all-encompassing, they almost are, and they represent an over-adequate sample size, so you presume your children if you have them have voice modulation issues as well. The scream need not have been from the children you may or may not have, you remind us; you live in a neighborhood teeming with children. You also propose that the inability of our children to modulate their voices stems from their inability to modulate their emotions. We cannot deny that our children scream more regularly than our adults. You proclaim this is so because they feel more unfettered joy, more bottomless despair, more irrational anger, more wild abandon. Our children are unlike us in that they feel more. However, they also recover more quickly from their screams, as exemplified by you, who have yet to recover from yours and appear no closer to letting it go and may need professional therapy before all is said and done. We propose not a refutation of your hypothesis but an augmentation: In general, children experience a higher apex of emotions and approximately the same nadir as adults, or slightly higher, but the apexes and nadirs occur more often for children, and they scream more frequently per apex or nadir. A not insignificant quantity of the maturation process is learning to squash those emotions. By the time they're adults, most of our children only scream internally when they don't get what they want. And not at all when they do. To provide positive feedback we would like to tell you, We enjoy working with you toward a greater understanding of our children. But we can't; we don't want you to understand our children so completely, or to think you do. Also, we must add that we experience the screams of our children as one of the few affirmations of life no matter how ear-piercing, and therefore believe it is inappropriate of you to cow them under your police state inquisition. The exception, you remind us of our selective memory, is if we are experiencing our children's screams ad nauseam within the confines of our too small and always shrinking house in which the screams echo and multiply and never dissipate and always intensify, pounding on our skull from without and within, obliterating our individual identities. In which case, their screams strike us as psychological noise torture, subconscious converted into inarticulate sound. The torturers do not mean to torture you, and indeed love you, and are loved by you, and fit someone's, if not your, definition of innocence. If this is your case, we, many of us parents ourselves, empathize with you. The only way we have discovered to create a brief respite from such screams, a moment of silence, is to scream a mature scream that overcomes the youthful screams, a loud, wounding, furious scream that hurts us and leaves us in silence

with our hurt, feeling that instead of objects of love and respect and comfort and veneration and wisdom and solace we are children, or black balls of nothing, or an evil deserving death.

41.

A claw rips into the colony collapsing tunnels and scattering her eggs if not the already digested maggot larvae harvest and you scurry frantically frenetically running frenzied frenziedly frenzy smelling fear on each other gather eggs onto your backs and flee down out in away or repel the monstrous intruder bite wield your pincers flail at its claws its armor its bone but you instead are repelled within your fortress your eggs knocked from your backs your tunnels crushed around you all of you your chemical communication frantic frenetic frenzied and here the tongue long sticky hundreds of you sticking to it at each lap you and you and you swallowed more and more of you lapped like water and swallowed a stream of your segmented bodies six legs futile pincers down the throat of this demon this titan this mythical beast either an aardvark or an armadillo, you don't know, you can't decide. Thousands of you are confident you are dissolved in the belly of an aardvark. Thousands of you are certain you are absorbed in the intestines of a nine-banded armadillo. Thousands and thousands of you have your opinions on the nature of the beast extinguished. Every last one of you votes; your consumer is voracious. But the difference in your choice between aardvark and armadillo is statistically insignificant, within the margin of error generated by simple clerical mistakes such as misreading your choice and/or you accidentally choosing one prehistoric predator of insects when you meant to choose the other -- your predators have their similarities after all -- a difference small enough or lack of difference large enough to be strongly affected by the β -factor or the Ω -factor or the \emptyset -factor or the whatever-factor generated by those many of you who choose randomly because you don't know if there is a difference between aardvarks and armadillos, or because you don't care to know what consumes you, not to mention those of you who would prefer to not choose and only in the end choose what consumes you because you force yourselves to and thereby choose randomly because you don't know or you don't care or there is no differentiating the available options except by how many a's their names begin with, as well as not choosing because both choices are bad choices -- either choice be it aardvark or armadillo will consume or consumes or has consumed you, so why bother investing yourself, what's it matter what you decide if the outcome is unchanged? -- thereby effectively strengthening the vote of those of you who believe you are right. Those of you who choose randomly cancel each other. The rest of you are confident and without self-doubt and

vehement and cut in half like the judgment of Solomon. Thousands and thousands and thousands of you are dead before the votes are tallied and the collective decision is made and she overrules it. Where is she? Is she dead with all of you or burrowed away hiding or escaped abandoning her progeny? What good is a queen if she lives on without you? What good is a queen who dies like you? Where is she? You've lost her. You've lost you. The tens of thousands of you are dead and know nothing of yourself or each other. Digested into your constituent proteins and absorbed in the gastro-intestinal tract and circulated via the bloodstream, you are dispersed throughout the body of an armadillo or an aardvark. It is night. Your sensitive nose smells the neighboring enemy ant colony and there also you dig and dine. Whether aardvark (earth pig, antbear, Cape anteater) or armadillo (little armored one, turtle rabbit, Hoover Hog, armored pig), your serpentine tongue is long and sticky and your claws strong for digging and your nose adept and your enamelless, incisorless teeth deep in your cheeks constantly growing, and you, a solitary creature, a living fossil, sleep in a burrow by day, which is nigh. Despite your similarities in diet and behavior and ecological niche, you are not closely related to yourself and inhabit regions separated by a vast ocean. The ocean is a geographical barrier you have never overcome, even though as an armadillo you can hold your breath for a full six minutes and run across riverbeds or lakebeds or conceivably oceanbeds or else inflate your intestines and float and swim for god's sake and expand your range until you inhabit the entire world -- you just wait, it's your manifest destiny -- and even though as an aardvark your specific species has persisted since prehistoric times, your chromosomes preserved from before the divergence of placental mammals though you are a placental mammal, your chromosomes more like the common ancestor of all placental mammals than any other animal in existence is what you're trying to proclaim, your species originating before the major modern taxa though you are now taxed with being the only surviving member of your order (Tubulidentata) -- you are 20 million years old, egad, the Miocene at least -- all of which is to say your heritage is survivalist, adapting to changing conditions, persisting by consuming the everpresent ants and neverdying termites and avoiding predators and especially man, so you'd think you'd've learned how to cross an ocean -- you will if you feel like it, but why bother now when you're this content and full of ants? As a nine-banded armadillo -- one of the few species, along with your cousins the sloths and anteaters, which you are expressly not, note the anteater's outrageous nose, to survive an invasion of creatures from North America over 3 millions years ago and are now, you remind, invading back, representing your lost mega brothers such as pampathere and glyptodontid, waving the flag of Xenarthra -- your back

bears nine bands of keratinized epidermal scales. These scutes cover plates of dermal bone and are connected by flexible skin. Rigid plates of bony armor wrap around your shoulders and hips, project over your head and tail, and hang alongside your legs. Your belly skin is hairy and tough, not unlike the entirety of an aardvark. As an adult aardvark, you weigh in the neighborhood of 120 pounds, or to put it so you understand it -- numbers often have no context, like the 9 bands of the invasive pest the nine-banded armadillo, what is the significance of nine? -- you weigh approximately as much as your wife if you have one or your husband if he's on the very small side of husbands or as you did as a freshman in high school. You drank the milk of your mother, be she aardvark or armadillo, and your babies drink yours, 4 armadillo twins annually or a single aardvark child repeatedly. Your armadillo ancestors were infected by Caucasian humans with leprosy, like Native Americans with smallpox, except you Xenarthran live on to re-infect your colonizers. Like a rockstar or tormented artist, aardvark you lives to nearly 24 in captivity. But you are not in captivity. You are wild and free and fat and happy, scuttling to your burrow at dawn. Your ears prick -- python? coyote? leopard? man? Run for the burrow in a zigzag trajectory chased by -- a pack of wolves? of hyenas? As an aardvark you're not going to make it so you dig with the utmost speed, up to 2 feet in 15 seconds, down to hide in the open grassland and escape into the ground. As an armadillo you are going to escape through the brush because you are smaller and faster than you look and erratic in your vector. You shoot through bramble without recourse to your shell. Aardvark you seals the tunnel you dug behind you, but your pursuer digs after you. Whatever it is is merciless and half-starved and at least half-persistent -- they usually give up by now, these desperate carnivores. It's no lazy ferocious lion or opportunistic gargantuan snake. You turn in your tight tunnel and prepare to strike with your claws and ram with shoulders and take your last stand in your underground stronghold as armadillo you hits a clearing and feels exposed and thinks again about burying yourself and rolling up within your armor that most predators will not expend the energy to penetrate -- the meat of your payoff is meager -- or lack the knowhow to broach but you see with your poor eyesight the scrub across the clearing and smell your den and scurry across the stone earth and you are going to make it. You run like the tumbleweed. What meets you in your aardvark foxhole is a single mangy wild dog smaller than you by a good margin, one-sixth of your size max. He should not be such an accomplished digger, digging being one of your specialties, and you should be able to beat the runt off with a swipe of your claws but this dog is strong with starvation, this dog is more desperate than a dying colony of insects or an emaciated pack of hyenas and its snarl expresses nothing left to lose and its

salivation is rank and you are almost across the clearing to the scrub brush, to your salvation, to your home under the dirt when a pair of shining eyes hurtling at you over the stone ground freezes you, approaching faster than your pursuer, already almost upon you, mesmerizing you, blinding you with their lit fury, freezing you with their shafts of brilliance, consuming your consciousness and will to live in flying sunbeams, and as a last instinctive reflex choice do-or-die act you leap straight into the air as the two shining hurtling roaring eyes reach you. You brain yourself on the eyes' undercarriage and lie on the pavement, roadkill, as the rat-of-a-dog sinks its teeth into your vulnerable snout and drags you inconceivably back out your tunnel into the open and shakes your great bulk furiously and snaps your thick neck and digs into your soft belly to 36, tearing, munching, slurping, bloodying his nose.

42.

Unprecedented cooperation, you congratulate yourself and inquire, Who screamed?

You are refreshed as from a very cold drink of water at having supplied a satisfactory answer. The relief passes right through you. Under no less duress, you confide,

My West Neighbor. Go to 93.
I don't know. Go to 100.

43.

You breathe deeply to maintain composure and cling to a lopped patience because regardless of response you will probably misunderstand the question, Who screamed?

Having been asked a question thrice, you answer with understanding and without a pinky,

My wife screamed. Go to 94.
I don't know. Go to 102.

44.

With your hand that's not nestling your middle finger in the cigar cutter, you hold your head affectionately, like a child's, and ask slowly, enunciating deliberately, Who screamed?

Frustrated with your ignorance and ashamed of the bloody mess you're making of your papers and your lap and your hand, you admit,

No one screamed. Go to 95.
I don't know. Go to 104.

45.

Using the technique most effective on your children if you have them, you grab your hair and yank until you look yourself in the eye instead of the light and scream, Who screamed?

Hurling your pain out your mouth, you scream back,

You did. Go to 96.

I don't know. Go to 106.

46.

Stop. Everytime you stop you're halfway there and it's fucking obnoxious. It's a pattern and you don't believe in intelligent design or dumb design or intelligent arbitrariness. Which leaves you to explain the cause of your personal Zeno's Dichotomy as historical progress or quantum probabilities or the Copenhagen theorem or social and economic Darwinism or Lamarckian inheritance or something more inconceivable like an anodyne everythingisconnected or string theory or spacetime fractals or true randomness or a lack of any causality whatsoever. Which is all the more frustrating than your existence being constructed, with purpose or without, intelligently or ignorantly, because there is no one to blame for you never arriving, no hero who is morally responsible for the symmetry, no antagonist to introduce an irregularity, a flaw, a singularity. Go. Everytime you go, the going stays the same. Traffic thickens and thins and presumably exchanges old automobiles for new and is enriched and complicated on occasion by fanciful vehicles like flying cars and bicycles and horsedrawn wagons and public busses, but it stays the same. The road remains four lanes wide and isn't remarkably different when it doesn't. Into the street wander a few unappealing pedestrians without rides or jobs or perhaps homes and definitely hygiene and certainly social graces, sweltering in the heat, pissing in the alley, sleeping in cardboard under an overpass, shitting anywhere they can: blackberry bramble or train station or behind the valet podium or in the bus aisle. Stop. In the rearview mirror, progress: you are hoary. Wizened. Neither hairy nor a whore. Elderly with a bun in the oven. Outside the mirror: buildings and all that. Mostly average height. An odd skyscraper. Condos or storefronts or apartments or offices or houses forming the corporate corpus you corpse through, all incorporated in design, all the same. Engineered but unarchitected antivibrant nondescript ununique unmoving repeated. Go. Articulate. Gears in the buildings turned by clocks, teeth ratcheting, cogs and sprockets doing the clock's bidding, providing mechanical advantage, providing human advantage, turning for another who turns for another in turn. Turn. Signal. Slow. Go. Roll

down the window because your AC's malfunctioning but the blast of hot air makes it hotter. A yellow heat. Caution. Your sweaty ass stuck to or slipping on the seat. Stop. At the soda fountain, oldmen cool off in the spray of Dr. Pepper or Mr. Pibb, the only place they can get any anymore, and catcall you, a woman aged of face and barely dressed and bald like them and with such a long woeful tale of tears winding around her leg and the vintage stud in her lip, a real throwback to earlier days, Hey Sugar, Hey Abuelita, Hey You, You are halfway from those buildings a ways back to that new-fangled contraption, that Tree, that future cration of mutually assistive arbor living, that geezer community where your children want to put you to get you off their conscious, off your conscious, but we'll get you off your conscious right here, that's not living, it's incarceration, they manufacture choices for you: evenings of Bingo or Discussion of Banal Literary Fiction, Meatloaf or Mac and Cheese, Acetaminophen or Tylenol, mildly assisted or mediocrely assisted or hotly assisted pricing structures, Apple Juice or Seltzer, there is no Dr. Pepper and there is no Mr. Pibb. You ignore them, stare ahead, try not to make eyecontact, wait on the light. They lean on their canes, hobble on their walkers toward you, croon, We'll be your Dr. Pepper or your Mr. Pibb, you choose. You're only halfway there. Let us show you the rest of the way to that woodland resthome where you can rest with us. Take our liver-spotted hand and we will take you to the somnambulant shade of the dark wood to lay with us in the dream bower to share our vast wrinkled past under the aviary of airborne porches to utilize our long gnarled experience in a hammock lined with pine needles that wraps around us like a cocoon – Go. Go. Go. Go. Go. Go. Stop. At the wifi hotspot patio of a café, some postadolescent enjoying the summer evening does not look up from the handheld device whose screen he strokes. You ask him about Tree City. Yeah, the amusement park? he continues to address his screen without raising his eyes, uh-huh, the Natural Entertainment Center, yeah, says here, right there, yeah, you're halfway there from the soda fountain down the street. Go. Go. Go. Go. Stop. Stop. Stop. Sticky in the humidity, a teenmother waits on the corner while her leashed son or unleashed dachshund pees on a firehydrant. When after waiting for her waiting on her son or dog to cross the street you step out of your ambulance and ask after where you're going, she answers, Oh my, you must've come from so far, a few blocks, in the family way at your age, and in that attire, from where did you muster the confidence all these years to make it halfway from the wifi café to Tree City USA while wearing nothing to hide the seed of hope implanted in your womb, its endosperm long consumed, I have to tell my husband, why just this morning he was yelling at the kids while the baby clung to his chest to get their goddamn clothes on and brush their teeth and shut

their mouths and don't talk to each other while he smashed the apple tree they'd built with blocks and they cried and he screamed that if they didn't get it done instead of school he'd take them straight to Tree City and drop them off and leave them with the other monkeys and they'd be late before they were even halfway there. Go. Go. Stop. Through the window of the drivethru liquor store, manned by a grandmother younger than you who says she's no good with numbers, you trade half the condoms and a slice of pizza for a 40. You ask her, How far? She says, Where did you stop last? You say, The firehydrant. She says, You mean at that intersection right there, the one with the stoplight, the firehydrant opposite the convenience store and caddy-corner to the payday loans and opposite the red maple on the other corner? You say, Yes. She veils her eyes behind eyelids heavy with midnight blue eye shadow, worries her gnarled rheumatic knuckles, visualizes, and then continues, I see that the park to which you travel – which was it? Central Park? Cape Disappointment Park? Rocky Mountain Park? Lincoln Park? Point Defiance Park? Sequoia Park? Audubon Park? Deception Pass Park? Glacier Park? Forest Park? – is only halfway away, and enjoy that 40, a 40 is a hell of a ride on a sultry midsummer night mired midway through the second trimester, proof of God's hand, maybe I'll see you there after I get off. Go. Stop. In a small orchard, under a tree in which tiny hard green fruit grow, on a carpet of blown brown blossoms and last year's rotten windfall, waiting for fruit to mature, sweating profusely and reeking of cherries, a vagrant says, You're so close, halfway from the drivethru liquor store next door, and halfway sounds the same as before, but halfway shrinks everytime, it's half of the last halfway, the distance you must now halve is tiny, all you have left is $d_0(1/2)^n$ where d_0 is the distance from your original origin to your final destination and n is the number of halves you've travelled, the number of legs on your journey, or the number of stops you've made, and no matter how large d_0 was for you, the distance between you and – where are you going? a city where people live in the trees? I live under trees, among trees, but that's not what you mean, you mean in trees, of trees. Well, the distance from here to there is so small now that halfway is like nothing at all, the matter of a few inches at most. Goodbye. The vagrant flashes you and you're about to scream but he cuts you off, Don't stop, go. See your work to fruition. Goodbye. You consider kicking him in his languid crotch but fear you'll overstep your destination when you land, and he's exposed himself to you as a sign of goodwill, of comradery, and between the honesty and vulnerability dangles a moment of weakness in which you leave a piece of pizza and your beer, 20 of the 40 ounces, or perhaps now 10 or 5, to he who has so little to live for but lethargic summer days in the dappled

shade of an orchard ripe with cherries, for you must be getting close, 20 of 40 malt ounces was more than enough for you for once. You could've done with less. You hope you didn't drink more. That chronic inveterate leeching progenitive hope again. You're going to make it to Tree City. Without abort. Before birth. You halfgo. You halfhalfgo. You halfhalfhalfgo. In your ambulance you drive half the curt distance you just drove, a nondistance like noskirttospeakof, a distanceless distance you travel to 38.

32. VII.

Torturers are in search of truth, and sometimes that truth cannot be put into words. At such times, the only truth we can give is pain. The noise torture of your children if you have them is only one method of truth-extraction. Methods can be classified into three arbitrary and overlapping categories: physical, psychological, emotional. (Methodical arbitrariness is a vital tool in torture.) We don't discuss our existential torture (torture loses its effect when elucidated). It is typically implemented by the victim and is thus very effective in dissolving the will. The best torture methods utilize the victim's self-torture as much as possible. Let the victim do the heavy lifting. Off the top of your head, you think of Orwell's mask of rats, USA's waterboarding, the medieval rack, sleep deprivation, the Mafia smashing fingers or kneecaps with hammers, the Aztecs burying you in sand in the desert, cutting off your eyelids, and pouring honey in your ears as an insect attractant, or maybe that's Persian scaphism you're thinking of. (Uncertainty is essential in torture.) But the most effective tortures are those you have not thought of, or those you've though too much of. That is, if you believe torture can be effective; you can choose; now that you're not being tortured it's your right to believe or not. When you are tortured, it won't matter. We regularly scream when tortured, never when we torture. It doesn't seem to much matter if we are asked a question or not, if we know the answer to the question or not, if we provide an answer or not, if the answer we answer is correct or not. We scream. The scream never stops the torture. The scream is pain. Physical pain, psychological pain, emotional pain. Yes, again, the unspoken existential pain. You feel we are getting repetitive, that no new information is being revealed, that there are no revelations to be had with us, that you are working us over and over, that our face is an abstract bloody pulp and your hand hurts and we still say nothing, or nothing that is anything, and you can certainly keep going, pulling fingernails and applying electrodes to testicles and cutting off nipples and pouring water down our mouths, and then moving on to our

loved ones, our spouses, our children. But it's become laborious and unilluminating and torturous, which we freely admit as we are many and it's going to take a lot of work from you to torture the truth, a truth, any truth from us. All of you are us, and the most effective torture is self-torture. You can't extricate yourself from us, we're the tar baby, and we've decided the first of us to break under your torture will be you. So why don't you just fuck off to VIII before you hurt yourself.

47.

If you ever were emotionally invested in the investigation, you are not now, and you are not the kind of person who can be mentally invested without being emotionally invested, and vice versa. (There, in your sentence a digression, a distancing. Nevermind. Be present; embody yourself.) But you are still bodily involved in the investigation because Viola will not release your hand. Once you longed to be gripped, but gripped you long to be released. She drags you out your West Neighbor's front door, unwilling to abandon her unwilling sidekick, unable to conscientiously release her trusted suspect, unsuspectingly not allowing him (you're distancing you from yourself again, a self-defense mechanism, or more charitably, a self-preservation technique and a spiritual act, talking about yourself in the third person, if not talking then writing and if not writing then reading, not solely reading, not reading alone no matter your solitude, not just reading, the reading is not just or unjust, justice is what you seek, or sought, having given the search to Viola) to snow-angel himself to death in the snow, to fall back spread-eagle and flap his arms and open and close his legs, to lie in his creation in the snow until his body turns to dust in the arid cold, except for his bones, which remain, a skeleton in the empty impression he left behind, a decayed snow angel, fossil evidence for some future forensic archeologist who collects the bones and snow-angels them again in fresh snow, and who uses the snow angel impression, melted and drifted and deformed by time, as a die for casting another you, you mean another him, to research his hypothesis that fossilized snow angels were screaming seraphim quenched and silenced in snow. You want the snow to silence you. (There, here, you simple and direct.) You want the snow to silence the feeble echo of the scream in your ear, to dampen the induced vibration whose impetus has long flown, to deaden the absence of your love, your loves, to bleach the memory of death, your deaths, everyone's deaths, and bury and freeze and kill and clean and soften the present and to make of the future a lazy, gentle, rounded, concealing, protective blanket. The world is colorless since the scream and the carnage upstairs and the upstairs erased. (It is probable you have availed yourself of both the upstairs and

the no upstairs by now, or perhaps now, in pursuit of better possibilities or complete comprehension or total becoming.) Is there nothing left for you here? You told yourself you would never hear anything as wondrous as that sung scream again, and that's probably true, which greatly reduces the promise of living. And a sizable portion of you believes your wife and children, who you aren't certain exist, are dead. A slightly smaller but yet significant percentage of you believes you, if there is such a thing, are dead. After all, your children if you have them have never left you alone this long before. They would be all over you if you or they existed, alive, here and now, what with the snow perfect for snow angels and snowmen and snowballs and sledding, and what with a hairless and fearless and vibrant and fun-loving and pretend-playing young woman bearing a pizza, which your children if you have/had them covet/ed. You covet them. If you had them, they were really the only reason you had to live, and if you didn't you had none, though you most likely invented one. They would be so sad if you died, are so sad if you are dead. Don't say you never think of others even if you contribute nothing material to their survival; you contributed love when/if they were here. And besides, who else would do what you wanted them to do? Okay, no, not them either, but in the trying and failing to force them to do what you wanted done, you molded them, made them little you's, seeding in them the same independence and need and apathy and desirousness and defiance and wanderlust and sense of stagnation and idealism and cynicism and love and lovelessness, if they ever were. Who else is there to love you unequivocally? No one. A substantial quantity of you go to 2 either by blade of walking stick to neck (are you leaving loose ends? did you forget the walking stick? did you leave it inside?) or gun (your secret?) to temple or rope to neck or magnifying glass to wrist (you don't know if you have the magnifying glass. do you even approximate a detective?) or body to ground from a great height or by pill by pill by pill or by over a great length of time drinking yourself to death or else suicide by snow angel, or more likely by closing your story and not picking it up again, dying by shutting the cover and choosing, deciding, saying to the you here that your life is unimportant, that you don't care about these yous, that you abandon them to unexistence while you live on for a while in some other mechanical reality without consideration of or reflection on or introspection into or exploration of other possible existences for you, refusing or forgetting or not caring enough to finish your story, believing that this world and the others herein will not offer you anything better than what it has already subjected you to. Other yous die every moment, and you let them. But to the insignificant number of you who inanely persevere, blind to the hopelessness of your pursuit, vapid to the meaninglessness of the investigation (or could it be possible that you

embrace the hopelessness, the inanity, the meaninglessness and believe that by continuing you make a meaning, a something of nothing, that you participate in creation?), to those of you who still believe there is something to investigate, that a scream can be caught like a genie in a bottle, trapped like a ghost by a proton stream fired from a positron collider, contained like a God in a book, apprehended like an evildoer in a comic, captured like a murderer or predatory lender or negligent financial market or an almighty-dollar-creating corporation, to you who are still as curious as an infant about the scream, or who yet have enough of the ant in them to march on, or who simply lack the biochemical capacity to feel the emptiness and pointlessness and nothingness of continuing (the emptiness a mountain, the pointlessness the tip of a needle whose breadth is the width of the world, the nothingness all matter being crushed into an impossible dense point within you, you collapsing on you, you a supernova encompassing the universe, you who will not hear you scream, there is no one to hear you scream), to you who have not yet gone as limp as overly-handled pages, Viola says,

-- We're so close I can smell him.

What you smell is the chicken coop in the backyard. Chicken shit and ammonia and above all the pestilent run (you've never been able to keep it dry no matter what roof you instituted, no matter what sand or hay or wood shavings or diatomaceous earth or desiccant you turned in), snow melted and churned into the mud by their strut and pace. The snow at your feet is mangled by tracks. There is nowhere for your snow angel in this mess. You follow the interweaving, crisscrossing, track-obliterating tracks with your eyes from your West Neighbor's yard to yours and vice versa, in and out of doors, dog tracks and cat tracks and rat tracks running up to fences and disappearing beyond, leading to a tree and gone, your tracks departing up the street east and approaching from the street west, in and out of your East Neighbor's front door, in and out and in and out of the parked ambulance whose tire tracks drive off west unless it was driven here in reverse, tracks atop tracks, pizza girl stiletto heel tracks and your logging boot tracks and gumshoe tracks and walking stick tracks and mother's flats tracks and the old, weathered, ill-defined, possible tracks of the possible galoshes or snow boots of possible wives and children filled with fresh snow. She says,

-- Fucker's been here. Almost got him. We need a divining.

She slogs to the coop, dragging you with her. She opens the access door and reaches in and comes out with a squawking flapping gold Buff Orpington (the lightest chicken in your flock dominated by Rhode Island Reds, you divert yourself, with a dark bound of a Black Star). Viola doesn't know how to hold a

chicken, the one incompetence you've witnessed in her. She places it on her arm like a falcon, but it claws her with shit-caked talons. (How avian flu is transmitted, you speculate.) The chicken draws blood, then shits on it. (Will it give her worms? Will Viola not wash her hands adequately upon completion of the investigation and, returning to making and delivering pizzas without proper protection, give gastroenteritis to her customers?) (You can imagine the hens have worms, round worms or gape worms or tape worms or hair worms. They've been sickly. The Black Star is prone in the coop, stiff as a board, either rigor mortis or frozen. -- You're displacing your despair or anxiety or inadequacy onto chickens; be here, be you, be present. -- You haven't wormed them in forever, the fenbendazole is on the counter but you've been too busy with this story to administer it, and so chickens die, and your negligence in concert with a scream from an unidentified source and how the pizza girl handles hens has the consequence of middle class residents of a suburban community in a modern first world country contracting intestinal parasitic worms -- good, bring it back to you and the scream, embrace your negligence, the repercussions, your disease -- or else gastroenteritis or avian flu.) Your Buff Orpington teeters night blind and flapping. Viola kind of shotputs her to you, disgusted, her arm disgusting, flinging blood and shit with the bird. You catch her by the legs and flip her over and let her hang upside down and the fight goes out of her. She's ready to die. Viola washes off her arm with snow that was as white as her skin, muttering,

-- Fucking divining.

With the chicken, you follow her back to an untrammeled patch of snow near the ambulance. Viola cuts out blocks of snow and builds a low circular wall. She holds out her hand to you.

-- Where's the stick?

-- I don't know.

-- Then how did I cut the snow blocks?, she asks with exasperation.

While rolling her eyes, she draws two bisecting lines in the snow with her stiletto heel, dividing the circle into quadrants. In one quadrant she writes,

-- You.

In the second, she writes,

-- West Neighbor.

In the third, she writes,

-- He In the Chair Who Ordered the Pizza.

In the last quadrant, she writes,

-- God.

She laughs, then with her heel addends,

-- Me.

She shudders, frowns, and adds to me to make,

-- Metaphysics.

As soon as she's done, she swipes away the meta,

-- Physics.

She sighs with resignation. To the quadrant she postscripts,

-- Devil.

And then with the ball of her foot, gently spreads snow to erase d and leave,

-- evil.

Still unsatisfied, she appends with her toe uncertainly,

-- Nick Stokes.

She shivers. Goosebumps rise on every swell of her skin visible to your naked eye, which is the overwhelming majority of it. She hawks phlegm and spits on the name. She raises her leg, exposing more goosebumped declivities, and is about to either piss like a male dog on the name or stomp on it like a giant crushing an entire town populated by unaware innocents as they read in their homes of an evening. But she, the consummate professional, restrains herself.

-- Fuck 'em. There are no metamorphosing gods or possessing devils or angels conceiving wisdom in your ear or enigmatic designs or evil or higher level deterministic computer programs or voodoo or puppeteers or observing laboratory assistants or above all authors of our world. But this is the higher order quadrant of the divining.

Because the authorial intrusion has gotten under her skin despite her physicalized disdain and her denial of authorial existence (though you are generally unperceptive of the indirect communication of the opposite sex, you are sensitive to this issue), you go to 197 to research her reference. You return. She is less upset. You hold the chicken's head on a round of wood, stretch out the neck, and before she can squawk Viola chops off her head with the stiletto heel and grabs the headless body from you and tosses it into the ring, howling,

-- Who made the scream?

The chicken runs headless, spraying blood, bouncing off the snow block wall, trampling the defining lines and incantatory words into illegibility. It runs back and forth for longer than is plausible, spurting more blood than is possible. In the churned pink she finally ceases and plops where you think the line was between You and He In the Chair. Viola raises an eyebrow in your direction. The mindless chicken has exonerated or absolved or immaculated Stokes, purifying your story of him while perhaps confirming Viola's denial of the existence of gods and devils and him and other higher orders.

You, on the other hand, are doubly implicated.

-- Not fair, you cry. You didn't put your name in there, just an ambiguous Me,

which you added to and erased, and you put all those other names in the same quadrant you erased yourself from when they each could have had their own quadrant, and I'm both You and He In the Chair, so I had twice as much chance of being found guilty as the West Neighbor, let alone the individual higher beings hiding from responsibility under the guise of a conglomerate.

-- There is no chance in divination or in chickens, Viola replies, except for in regards to irrelevant quantum events, and there can legally only be four quadrants, or the total will be greater than the whole, and you cannot be You and the mutilated He In the Chair because he might be dead and he is in the chair.

Renewed by the half-vindication, you push for further exculpation,

-- Who is to say You is me? Chickens may not be given to chance, but there is imprecision in their answers, and they affect the result of what they measure, guilt, by the very act of measuring --

-- The chicken is an oracle. It is our understanding that is imprecise. And of course the headless chicken affects the outcome, we are all connected, no one is isolated, every action matters whether it is going out or staying in, experimenting with food or music or art or people or sexual positions or alternative energy or how to dig a hole or sticking to the tried and true, acting or observing, bloodily flailing headlessly or applying a scanning electron microscope, caring for chickens well or negligently, eating plant protein or meat, exploring the world or loving close at hand or not moving except to breathe, eating pizza with pepperoni or with sausage or consuming nothing and from whom you order your pizza or nothing, seeking to heal or understand, regularly washing your socks to reduce foot fungus or not wearing socks to reduce your carbon footprint, cultivating an inner world or outer, screaming or holding your tongue, investigating yourself or others, choosing to live or die. And remember, everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Now, let's deepen our comprehension.

Courteously, she opens the rear door of the ambulance. You climb into 39.

32. VIII.

The Search: For truth. For meaning. For God. For a search. Asking ourselves questions that have no objective answers makes us scream. For example: Why? Is matter infinitely divisible -- proton to quark to gluon -- and what is beyond the universe and what is dark matter and antimatter and how can space and time bend and what the fuck does string theory mean and where do black holes lead and is ours the only universe and what caused the Big Bang and what is energy? How can Santa Claus deliver his gifts to homes around the world in a single evening, even given that his

sleigh pulled by reindeer can fly? Why have you forsaken me? Do stars possess consciousness of which we are unaware? Is there other intelligent life in the universe and is it intelligible to us and is it as full of emptiness? How many types of screams are there? Am I here? Why are we speaking so much when this is your story? Are we inside you, elucidating the many reasons why we scream, providing you with many possibilities to investigate, giving you life? Are we you? Is the imprudent search, though its fruit be screams of frustration and despair, what raises us above the animal? How to live? Why question accepted principles if it only produces other accepted principles, or screams, or nothing? Is the human condition ameliorable? How can you transition from inquisitive to declarative to imperative when you are so filled with doubt and indecision and unknowns? Allow us to summarize. We scream in response to inadequate answers to The Search questions religious and irreligious, decadent and ascetic, hedonistic and masochistic, self-conscious and oblivious, scientific and spiritual, existential and physical, monotheistic and pantheistic and materialistic, inspected and unexamined, logical and passionate, reasoned and emotional, environmental and biological, astro- and quantum, technological and natural, communal and individual, eastern and western, detached and ambitious. Our list may seem all-inclusive; it's not; it's insufficient; it's indicatory of the insufficiency of solutions; its indicatoriness is meant to be inclusive. If we have excluded philosophies or ideologies or ways of life or principles or guidelines or laboratory results that purport to answer in any infinitesimal way the How, What, Why of existence, and we have (we should know, attempting to answer said questions, along with perpetuating the species, has been our primary narrative continuity), it is because of our own limitations, our finite knowledge, our own boredom with expression, our sense that you are nearing the point where you scream an exasperated scream at our collective lack of progress. We invite you to add to the list. Take as long as you like. Rejoin us when you're done – you'll never be done – when you decide to stop, if you ever choose to start. It is time for us to move on and see if that gets us anywhere. But prior to that what we were saying was that what we do not include in The Search scream category is your search for objects, your keys, or your great-great-great-grandmother's locket, or your child, for example, because no matter how frustrating losing a something can be, a something can be found. On the other hand, if you search and search without finding the object, lose all hope of finding it, know the object cannot be found, so that the object itself loses its

thingness, such as if you dropped your keys down a storm drain, perhaps on purpose, but nevertheless continue to search your car, couch cushions, cat litter box, confident every crease can become a canyon into which the storm drain drains; or if you search for your great-great-great-grandmother's locket without knowing if she had a locket, or without knowing if you had a great-great-great-grandmother, or with knowing that her fair corpse wearing the locket was jettisoned at sea before reaching the New World; or if you search for the children you may or may not have, of whom there are implications of non-existence, of grizzly death, of being out eating pizza with their mother – if the search comes to define you and there is no conceivable fulfillment of the search, we'll talk about that. We mean to be inclusive and encompassing; it's a trait grown from our futile, humbling search for completeness; we empathize with the screams induced by many varieties of searches. But we are talking of the search for the ephemeral, the impossible, the unattainable. Have we said that? Like a scream.

48.

The blood drains to the side on which you fell. The skin goes livid under the patchy coat. Blowflies arrive in under a minute. They come from up to ten miles away. They buzz probe lay eggs in you. They procreate in the flesh that was once you but now degrades. They are not a nuisance; a corpse is not sentient. The body loses heat to the environment. As ever, but you have ceased to convert stored chemical energy into active chemical energy and mechanical energy and heat to replace the energy you bleed. Your corpse lacks the kinetic. You are all potential. Proliferated oxygen is depleted. The brain dies. The skin lives on as an egg bed. Anaerobic microbes resident in the gastrointestinal tract and respiratory system flourish and colonize and consume, anaerobically respiring lipids and proteins and fats, no longer renewable resources, polluting the body with propionic acid and lactic acid and methane and hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide and ammonia. The increase in acidity breaks down cells membranes; cells disgorge hungry contents. Cells undergo autolysis. Enzymes produced within the pancreas dissolve the pancreas. You consume yourself. The body putrefies. Green bottle flies and blue bottle flies and black blowflies swarm and lay eggs, two hundred apiece, black and green and blue glinting winged jewels adorning your eyes, your ears, your nose, your anus, your mouth, the wound on your inner thigh, pulsating over your orifices, blocking clogging filling your holes from the eye of the sun. The musculature stiffens with rigor mortis. Houseflies and flesh flies arrive and lay eggs and live larvae respectively in the

skin if in less quantity than the blowflies. Your skin marbles green as your bacteria digest your blood, converting hemoglobin to sulfhemoglobin. The pressure of internal gasses increases, a byproduct of bacteria metabolism. The abdomen expands. Blood bubbles from your nose. The body bloats. Internal tissues continue to autolyze and liquefy. Your rigor mortis deteriorates. Frothy, green, carbonated liquid and rank gasses leak from your mouth and your anus. Maggots hatch. Ravenous, they grind flesh in mouth hooks and dissolve it with enzymes in their excrement. They shovel oozed liquid and liquefied tissue and masticated meat into their mouth. They writhe in a social mass. They grow. They are 10 times larger when they molt and burrow. Their perforations in your stretched skin in conjunction with ruptures caused by the great pressure within the body cavity release more noxious gasses and decimate the oxygen seal. Oxygen penetrating the body encourages the activity of aerobic bacteria. Cheese flies laying eggs in you join the blowflies and viviparous flesh flies and houseflies lesser and greater. Their young feed and excrete and feed and excrete and feed and excrete in you or what was you. Rove beetles and carrion beetles and ham beetles and Hister beetles hiding under your corpse during daylight feed on maggots and lay eggs in your flesh to hatch and larvally prey on larvae preying on you and in laying and hatching and preying further deprave your structural integrity. Ants feed on eggs and larvae and capitalize on the bounteous ecosystem you provide. Larvae hatch, feast, molt, are feasted upon, feast, molt, burrow. Your skin slips from its subcutaneous tissue. Pierced repeatedly, you deflate, purging gasses and disintegrated tissue whose toxicity kills surrounding vegetation. Insides liquefying, caved in on yourself, you lie on a decompositional island, your surroundings outside your cage a barren wasteland except for ants carrying off larvae partitioned or whole to be dragged underground to their colonies in 41, and the coming and going of flies, especially now the black scavenger fly which replaces the exiting blowflies and houseflies, and the large-jawed rove beetle and the yet increasing population of shiny metallic Hister beetles. The flesh proximate to your former orifices around your anus and head is completely consumed and the writhing social maggot mass migrates and concentrates in your thoracic and abdominal cavities. Most of your mass is no longer yours but maggots', with the larval mass itself partially redistributed through predators ants beetles wasps outward from your cage. Much of the rest of you leaches into the ground, temporarily over-fertilizing it with phosphorous potassium calcium magnesium nitrogen. Your gaseous expulsions poison the breeze. The breeze carries the expulsions away. You diffuse in the atmosphere. You begin to stink less. There isn't much of you left to stink. Larvae abandon you in mass, migrating, slinking away to dig into the

ground and pupate and blossom wings and emerge in 7-14 days, hairy, with compound eyes, capable of flight. You desiccate. Skin beetles feed on dried skin and tendons and bone and hair, sharing the hair with larval moths, sharing the skin with mites who have been with you from the beginning. Fully inanimate you emit no odor. Your final expressions have flown. What remains: bone, a bit of cartilage, flecks of skin. Adult cheese flies emerge and disperse. Blowflies and bottle flies do not brighten the body's dissolution or your absence with their iridescence. Millipedes centipedes snails roaches mill. Eating and excreting and laying eggs. Vegetation returns resurgent penetrating the hardpan of the cage, milkweed and morning glory twining up the bars, bleached skeleton ensconced in grasses and sedges and wild oats and wildflowers, bones gnawed on by mice in an abandoned enclosure of native pasture, a cube of wilderness, a bull's tomb in which no animal domesticated or wild may graze. Neither bat nor clown return. The microbes and community of arthropods utilize the bull's potential; your energy is dispersed to insect bird rodent and soil; nothing identifiable remains.

49.

The traffic thickens from soup to stew but still flows if viscously and peristaltically as the interstate narrows to 4-lane highway fortunately bleeding vessels of potential people you'll never know thankgod at intersections and parkinglots and driveways and wait through cycles of red green yellow on the descent along a slight grade toward an embryonic destination that part of you wants to abort but cannot because your motherly imperative is strong despite the attire and dripping tattoos and hairlessness and intimidating mien and because the fetal idea of contentment, of a woodland paradise, of treed transcendence, of communal love, of a place free of suffering, of a sylvan nirvana, of spring has already developed fingers, eyes, mouth – it sucks its thumb, it's alive and it's your life – and though you wish you had protected yourself against the germ of Tree City USA you were inseminated and you cannot retroactively use contraception that the insurance you don't have wouldn't cover and which you have no money to buy even if there were a prophylactic, polymer or hormonal or chemical or psychological or philosophical, impermeable to hope's subatomic seed. Farms and copses and fallow lands are replaced by personalityless monotone strip malls and outlet malls by fishtacoshops in exchurches and officeparks by the repeated integral of derivative suburban homes and gated communities by postagestamp parks and industrial wasteland by architectureless officebuildingcondos and the landscape by nothing. By city. The city sloughs its nutritive lining over and over and over, redeveloping, cramping to give you a

sense of progress, of going there, of uterine contraction, menstruating for you – you cannot – to make you feel something, a headache, an excess of emotion, an abysmal depression so that when you arrive, when you finally yield to another stifled driver or your crumple zone is crumpled or finally your ignition hotwired by another's striving motile tale and you imbed in a new suburban wombhome and subdivide, your foundling feeling of incommensurate relief and abject purpose and essential usefulness and generative sacrifice will compensate for your nausea and weight gain and discomfort and ultimately pain, like a burst of color at the end of a long gray cold overmature winter. When the future you is impregnated by that suburban dream of daily comfort and banal contentment, remember that you were first impregnated by and are still pregnant with the slow-to-gestate hope of transcendence in Tree City, so slow-to-gestate that your body has been bowling eggs down your fallopian tubes again trying for a spare in your stagnant fecund unmenstruating swamp of a womb. As it is, for now, the present, seditious nonconformist you senses your life slipping away like your eggs, unfertilized – except for the egg that went and got knockedup by some smoothtalking quicktocoming nonreciprocating Tree City billboard spore, the fertilized egg that seems stuck in fetal limbo, not maturing past uterine thumbsucking and soft bones and extraterrestrial face, though your placenta encourages you repeatedly, Don't worry, we're halfway there from when you checked in last, look, now a kidney, another halfway and a gall bladder, another halfway and an appendix, another halftime and half the large intestine, another halflife and half the other kidney, another halflife and half of another thumb in half the mouth or the mouthhalf or the halfmouth, another halflife and half of the other half of the large intestine, or is that half of the half of the half ... Your life slipping away like coherent thoughts obliterated by screaming children you don't have yet and a dreamnurturing placenta you do. Thank some amniotic god for the relative lack of fertilization you've had to endure due to the celibate monasticism of your journey. – still the journey not the unarrived orgiastic destination you note with jaundice. Your life slipping away like your tattooed tears, which drip more and more as your skin wrinkles. Your life slipping away in halves. The free radicals and saturated fattyacid chains and antibioticclaced beef of nutritionless fastfood have claimed half of what would have been your remaining life. But once instituted, does your new remaining life become what would have been your remaining life and get halved? Perhaps though you age incessantly you will never reach old age. You consider eating the pizza for a change, but yet fear you'll meet a man tailgating on his couch or a band of schoolchildren gathered around a campfire or a highscool soccer team after a big game or a passel of old men at an Elks meeting to whom it should be

delivered. Like a baby. Is that your biological clock ticking away your half-lives? Your pregnancy is not progressing. You need contraception. If not to act retroactively then to prevent future hope. You have found a purpose, to birth the seed of your Tree-City-hope from primeval moist darkness to ethereal desiccated enlightenment, and you will never achieve it if you are again impregnated. Preserve the hope you have nurtured in your womb for so long. Don't settle. You are old and pregnant but not postmenopausal and infertile; your body cannot help you. Fuck the biological imperative to procreate, this nature-imposed need for babies and screaming and responsibility and lackoffulfillment that drives your pursuit of fulfillment through genetic perpetuation and vicarious living and unqualified or qualified love and resentment and rebellion and continuation of the human predicament by bequeathing reasons to scream on another helpless soul and teaching him or her how. Sometimes you don't have a choice about conception, but be proactive and take protective measures.

You swing into an empty parkinglot with an ATM at center. Almost empty. Someone sleeps in the driverseat of an old Cadillac, the rearseat piled to the roof with stuff. A van with tinted windows rocks. Two men, one black and one white, shake hands, hug, reach into each other's pockets, and go their separate ways. Nobody looks at you, your skin sagging out of whatnobodywouldcallaskirt. The slight expectant mother bulge at your waistline is indistinguishable from an old lady bulge. There is a tree in a square of dirt on one side of the ATM, a rosebud or plum or dogwood in full bloom. A pot of vivid tulips bursts red yellow purple orange on the other side. A bird whistles, you think a bird. The sun feels good, though your overexposed aged skin, especially your bald head, is more susceptible to metastases by the moment. The tree isn't affiliated with the Tree City for which you search, but it is beautiful. You can't help the lift it gives your spirits. Bluebells break through cracks in the pavement. The ATM has no slot for your card. You wave the card around what you think is an ATM, but nothing happens. You glare at the mechanical eyeball watching you, but nothing happens. You touch the screen, but nothing happens. Of the money on your card, time has made a piece of plastic. Your small change most likely would have been inconsequential now anyhow, useless for purchasing pills or rubbers or pessaries or implants or internal optical assessors of spermatozoa genetic strength or irradiation devices or whatever technology the kids use nowadays. You probably won't meet anyone worth fornicating with. The species doubtlessly weakens; there is not a man left who would excite you. But wait, things haven't changed so much, they've remained the same, there are still loving, generous souls: on the backside of what could be an ATM, among tangles of exposed wires and electronic guts, next to a receptacle for used needles and a dispenser of clean

ones, above a crate of diapers and an overflowing trashcan of dirties, hangs a bucket of condoms without bells and whistles, oldschool condoms without nanoprocessors, condoms you would know how to use if properly motivated, condoms individually wrapped in plastic upon which is printed the slogan "Halfway to Making It". With spermicide to boot. No need to worry about getting more pregnant than you are. You won't mate and procreate another stillborn hope. You take a handful and they like a placebo cure your obsession with you expecting. You expect nothing. When someone kindly yields, you merge hopelessly back into traffic and drive in the same direction you were going to 46.

32.IX.

Myth: One way the search used to be answered was with myth. It comforts you to suppose your inadequate answers will pass into myth, given time. But you don't get a say in whether or not your story becomes myth. If it does, it'll be long after you cease. In truth, we don't much believe in myths anymore, except for the religious and the patriotic and the economic. We value the myths we don't believe in as tools of insight. What we do believe in has not yet become or been designated as myth, though it will be after we're dead, after you're dead, and our beliefs about our way of life and place in the universe and relation to existence are proved fictitious. The fictions that are sufficiently illuminating will not be forgotten. They will be incorporated into future consciousness, into the art and science and philosophy of potential civilizations. You hope, with hubris. You believe in history; perhaps the scream was or is a mythical scream echoing in our collective, historical subconscious. Perhaps mythical screams lie dormant in our social constructs, biding time until liberated by the proper oscillation like a crystal precipitating out of a supersaturated solution. Or perhaps a scream was fertilized in a young myth many moons ago, and, incubating in the myth, developed and grew and matured and ripened and finally reached a terrifying fruition. You plunder a few of the favorite myths that we don't believe in for possible screams you heard. Perseus: the screams of Danae when Perseus is conceived in her by Zeus; of Danae and her baby when they are locked in a chest and put out to sea by her kingly father; of the Three Gray Women when they realize Perseus has stolen their eye; the unscreamed scream of desolate Medusa, murdered by Perseus with her own reflection; the scream of fury from her two sisters as they chase the culprit Perseus in his winged shoes; the unvoiced scream of relief by Atlas when Perseus turns him to stone at Atlas's request in

exchange for the hat of invisibility in which Perseus will slay the gorgon; the silent stone scream of terror from Danae's unwanted self-declared kingly fiancé, Polydectes, and his retinue when they see Perseus pull from his wallet the gorgon's head before their now stone eyes, their mouths frozen open but unable to express; and the scream of known and unavoidable death when Danae's father, Perseus's grandfather, the expelled king, Acrisius, he who locked his heirs in a chest because he bought the oracle's prophecy that his grandson would kill him, is unwittingly killed while he stands in the audience at an athletic competition by the unerring victorious javelin or discus of Perseus, thrown beyond mortal ability. From our myth of Hercules, he of many labors, and many slayings besides his labors, there are too many possible screams for you to enumerate. You could enumerate them, but you haven't all day. You might have all day, but we don't. You choose three. The scream of Hercules's wife and children as he murders them. The scream of Hercules when he comes to his senses after his lunacy abates and he realizes he has slaughtered the loves of his life. And, to site one of his labors, the neverending scream of the Hydra, whose nine screams multiply as Hercules cuts off her heads and two more spring up to answer each decapitation, whose screams then decrease as Hercules wakes up and sears shut the gaping necks before the new heads sprout, whose final scream continues, unrelenting, unwavering forever, a single monotone, muffled cry from her immortal, undecapitable head buried by Hercules under a monumental rock. You abandon the rest of our classical myths, especially that over-handled whore Odysseus, as well as those myths more ancient and babylonian and eastern and animist and norse and indigenous, as well as the modern myths of superhero comics and fantasy books and science fiction movies and cartoon empires, at our urging because we can only take so much truth-mining in stories we don't believe in, and because our lives are short and myth is not and the scream is already gone and yet still here. Like you.

From our younger supply of American myths hypothetically based on historical events, a category which we regrettably failed to implore you to not consider, you choose three possible screams: the death scream of John Henry, in which he beats the steam engine with the last swing of his hammer; the cough scream pushed out of Jesse James by the impact of the bullet in the back of his head, the trace scream carried with the brain film spread molecules thick along the bullet's leading edge and imbedded in the

wall, the soft hiss scream of pressure escaping the exit wound, and the nearly inaudible volume of his scream multiplied by each retelling of the story of Jesse James shot from behind; the lovelorn scream of Mary Lincoln when she is widowed by John Wilkes Booth, and her institutionalized screams after she loses her mind or someone decides she does, and the hysterical screams of the Ford Theatre audience who suddenly become unexpected unscripted unwilling actors in a real event instead of watching a poor imitation on stage. Don't stop now, we say, continue on into a history of mythical proportion: the war scream of the Civil War's dead and maimed and wounded and the war scream of those who wounded and maimed and killed and the war scream of loved ones for victims of war, all the war screams of death and maiming and wounding and witnessing and inflicting and loving and losing wrapped into one long howl, and the subjugated screams of slaves stolen, whipped, raped, separated from our loved ones, transported like goods, made to live in squalor, all of us perceived as objects, treated as economic products, less human, less than human, beasts of burden, forced to perform heroic labors.

The screams of our sons.

So many screams. You would go on peeling our scabs and dredging screams from deep wounds and reinfllicting pain we've swallowed, but we do it for you, if you want to hurt, let's hurt, we rip up scabs with fingernails and teeth and the screams ooze out again, the wounds ache, the lacerations pulse. We have screamed so much, so often, to no end, in our myth, our history, our narrativized experiences, our counterfactuals, our memories, our true fictions, that all the possible screams overwhelm you. You are inadequate to the scale of our ache. You cry as you try to respect and contemplate and appreciate all the screams that we bare, that we bear through long labor, that we attempt to push through the wounds but that will not be fully born and cut loose and so will not die. You cry at the small percentage of the screams throughout human history that you perceive, and the immense aggregate of pain and suffering and oppression and violence and despair and blindness beyond your perception, and the meager ash pile of pleasure and joy and love and transcendence and empathy and awareness that is the sole possibility for balance. You cry as you try to think of a story that justifies our screams. You cry to not scream.

There, there. Our myths are virulent and digest pain; our scabs are as

relentless and pitiless as our wounds. Don't let your tears muddy the clarity of your thoughts. Stop thinking of our abundant past screams, or you will never find your own personal scream.

50.

You want to cheat. You try to deny it, but you know yourself. You want a shortcut, a loophole, an accounting error in your favor, a semantic slight of hand that puts you in the black. Everyone else is doing it, no one gets ahead without little white lies, complete truth is impossible to attain and self-conflicting and fiction. Everyone else who has entered the Labyrinth has cheated to get out and left you here alone. Are you the type of person who always follows the rules? Do you obey? Are you a fucking lemming? Maybe you'll enter a room and all the lost souls will be packed there like sardines like fish in a barrel like sticks clipped and rammed into a yardwaste bin like compressed gas like clothes crammed in a suitcase like bodies piled in a mass grave, a bulldozer slamming its bucket down to compact the corpses like filldirt around a pylon for an under construction skyscraper to be packed with offices and the people that inhabit them. But why witness such grotesque detention? Are you a glutton for punishment? A masochist? Why not cheat and escape? It's not the journey, it's the destination, it's a race, it's who gets there first. You won't be first, you know, too late for that, you're not exceptional, but you are okay, you can still arrive in the middle, you can still be mediocre. You can't be last or all the resources will be depleted. Not everybody can be in the imaginary room in which you smushed them. People are mostly made of water and therefore are assumed to be mostly incompressible, as opposed to their gaseous souls. You'd be crawling over them. You could capitalize on them. Wait for them to fill the labyrinth and see from where they leak and try to wriggle out that exit. But what distinguishes you from them? There's a high chance you'd become one of them, another in the crush of bodies. Are you them now? And why wait? You're not swimming in bodies, not yet, so some have gotten out, and no one's ever gotten out and made a life for themselves without breaking the rules. You make your own rules. The rules are for everyone else. The rules are only words to be broken. They're not commandments carved in stone. Or they are, to be broken as often as the commandments. The walls aren't stone; they're paper. Rip your way out. Or they are stone but you're a law-defying root whose tip has found a crack and sinks into it and probes, explores, expands cell-by-cell, grows to water, breaks open the walls, searches for the nutritive decomposition from which you'll grow into a tree, a flower, a flowering tree, an angiosperm. But you will not be rooted here, no. You march to the beat of your own drummer, the drummer in your head, a

big bass drum drummer booming out your pace. Nothing binds you, traps you, incarcerates you in these passages but you. What stops you from skipping from chamber to chamber until you find Atlas and the Women of Gray's eye? Words. What prevents you from rifling through these passages, through the labyrinth, through the concurrent stories and picking a different world to live in? Nothing. What denies you the right to cheat and flip forward and back, forward and back, forward and back until you find the exit? Nothing but you.

The room is empty, filled with nothing. Filled with you. Torches maybe. A flickering light. Three passages. Do you abide the easy visible options, the roads much travelled, the stated choices? Is this a contest and do you play to win? Or do you disqualify yourself? Do you adulterate your story, commit an infidelity against your principles, degrade and pork your integrity? Do you have faith that persistence in your struggle will be rewarded, or are you a quitter? Do you conform to these confines, obey these laws, take these prescriptions, or fuck them and go your own way and live your life and scribe your story?

If you go north, slip submissively forever to 156.

If you go west, scuttle abidingly forever to 122.

If you go south, wriggle pridefully in groping, handed-down convention for two times forever to 165.

51.

Snow drifts in the open window. Viola's skin glows under the blacklight. Goosebumps rise on her arms, evidence of either the wintry draft's violation or her excitement at finding another headless body, this one on a bed under a white glowing violet blanket.

-- Nice posters, she says.

There are black velvet posters of a young, radiant Hercules or Perseus or Theseus, and an incandescent Sherlock Holmes or Baggins or Molloy, and a scream of Munch and a melting of Dali and a stretched emaciation of Greco fluorescing beside a skull and crossbones and multiple bursting bustieres, and violent splotches on the ceiling of stars and galaxies, and the word Truth painted in Tide, invisible under normal conditions but resplendent purple under the blacklight.

-- You're sure he wasn't an adolescent?

You grunt. You're again unmanned by the sensation that you've been here before. Perhaps the feeling is attributable to the unsettling experience of stepping into a facsimile of your college dorm room. Slinking to the corner, you encounter a hairball and the smell of cat piss. Viola peeks under the covers, nods, lays them down again with a hush, and likewise grunts.

-- Note something chewed on his neck, she notes. Note the head is again not present. Note the splotches on the ceiling. The logical conclusion is that someone ate his head and then masturbated. A lot.

-- How do you know they're semen?

-- By the pirate flag.

-- ?

-- A joke. Second time I've used it and you didn't get it the first time either. Because it glows in ultraviolet light.

-- So does Tide.

-- Do you want your story to be twisted and provocative and offensive, or clean and dull?

-- What if it was him ... doing that, until his head exploded? And something, or someone, came and chewed on his neckhole later. To, you know, consume the art.

-- You're disturbed. We are not investigating suicide by self-pleasuring expression.

You would be more disturbed by the degeneracy in your West Neighbor's bedroom, but after all you've encountered you can't be much more disturbed. What have you learned about what caused the scream and why, about the when and the how and the who? What good can you gain from exposing yourself to a private turpitude, to a lonely and blinding pastime, to a fleetingly pleasurable, weak-willed, loveless endeavor?

-- Therefore, a man did this, she logics.
-- Your pronouns long since assumed the culprit's maleness.
-- I've learned to trust my pronouns.
-- The splotches look like galaxies.
-- Multitudinous, scattershot, terminated possibilities. Each a desiccated galaxy telling a story useless to our investigation except as substantiation of their progenitor.

-- We could take a bite from his neck and internalize him and thereby learn who did this to him and how.

Your morality has fled out the window since the possible murder of your wife and children, or maybe they're not dead, maybe they're disappeared, or absented, or unexisted, or not your wife and children, or you don't know. You hate yourself. They're not here. Without them, even if you never had a wife or children, you no longer know why you should do one thing instead of another. Without attachment, why do anything? Liberated from relationship, serving only yourself, unleashed from responsibility, why follow any legal or natural or social constraints such as Thou Shalt Not Eat Thy Neighbor?

-- Sick fantasy. I've a newfound respect for you. Grab that pirate flag as evidence to hang on the wall of my laboratory, and the blacklight, mine's burnt out, and the duvet too, it's cold in the lab in winter and he's no warmer under it and we're above discretion. Let's finish with the decapitated wretch and get out of this ultraviolet glow redolent of self-sex and beheading and cat piss for a breath of fresh air at 47. Glass his bellybutton for lint and watch out for his wayward member while I scrape splotch samples from the ceiling into ampules and crusties from his neck cavity into baggies -- Stop. Note the vintage, cassette capable boom box on the dresser.

From the dark nadir of his perhaps bottomless, lint-filled bellybutton wherein you momentarily lose yourself, you emerge and note the vintage, cassette capable boom box on the dresser. It emits a faint, mechanical sound of rotation. The Record and Play buttons are depressed. She pushes Stop. Click. She pushes Rewind. Whirr. She pushes Stop. Click. She pushes Play. The climax of the most beautiful or horrifying or enchanting or primeval wordless sung scream high and female and violet drops both of you to your knees, in your hands clutching your

throbbing engorged heads on the verge of eruption joy and torment harmony building vibration together past awareness into ravishment to die now please braiding now up up up let your head explode violet hardening don't head stop big as release moon hard please higher impact calve ignite erupt burst gush purple now -- Viola snatches your stick and smashes the boom box. Click. Silence. You both pant. Tremble. You cry a little. The tape unspools on the floor. The violet glow grows. You will never hear a sound wondrous again.

-- The violence, she says.

The song clicking.

-- Lucky I'm marginally harder to arouse than you.

Lost forever.

-- Is that the scream you heard?

You without gesture.

32. X.

You: You wish we hadn't made this personal. We say to you, If your story, your quest, your life is not personal, why undertake it, why participate in it, why not end it? You say, It's not about me. It's about the scream and the victim and the perpetrator and the cause and the witnesses and the motives and the alibis and I am the detective. It is my purpose, you continue to continue, to apply reason to solve the scream and, furthermore, it's not about you. To which we reply, If it is neither about us nor about you, then it is about nothing. We as witnesses have provided possible reasons for why we could have screamed. You likewise witnessed the scream; you were within the margins of the crime scene with us; and whether you are emotionally invested or not, you are taking part in and ostensibly leading this account of the scream. Why could you have screamed?

There is a long silence during which you perhaps consider all the reasons you have to scream. We don't know; you don't say. We wonder if the pizza will ever arrive and if you have a whore on speed dial and if the wife and children you deny or at least obfuscate will return to you and what kind of person you really are. What are you capable of? You are silent and impenetrable to us. A monolith. Everything we suppose about you is a projection, a reflection, an echo of ourselves.

We can only remain engaged with an unresponsive rock for so long. Just when we are turning again to one another, folding back in on ourselves, forgetting about you –

You say, Perhaps I did not hear a scream.
We say, Really?
You say, I mean a scream outside myself.
We say, You heard what was in your head.
You say, I'm just saying.
We say, Then why did you drag us into this?
You say, It is helpful for me when solving a puzzle or a riddle or a mystery or a math problem or a crime to talk to myself. And it should not be precluded that a possible solution to the scream is that there is no scream.
We say, Which would make your endeavor pointless, your purpose purposeless, and moreover be a waste of your limited brainpower and deductive capability and capacity for insight, a drain on your meager ability to affect change internal or external or collective or personal, and a slaughter of your toddling time as a self-aware animal who hypothetically has the potential for transcendence or love or truth or beauty or companionship or art or discovery or self-discovery or –
You say, I feel like I need to scream. I'd run to the toilet but I can't get up.

52.

You choose the bull over all other warm-blooded prey in your ecosystem. Your brothers and sisters and parents and children and cousins and aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces and grandparents and grandchildren -- the other you's -- sup off other prey and share their flavor with the hungry you's. You cannot be everywhere at once, feeding off all prey at once, becoming everything at once, but the blood will be drunk and regurgitated and shared and you choose the bull's warm infrared glow and the steady bellows of his sleeping breath. You choose the bull repeatedly. You live off the bull.

You know the bull knows.

The bull knows. You know. The small bat tiptoes up to you silently on its wings. You appreciate the pretense of stealth and the dignity it affords you. You can no longer sleep until after the bat comes and drinks and goes. If it is the same bat every night, which you like to think because you like to think that you've built a relationship with an individual rather than a faceless identity smear of many winged rodents. Your caged life is justified if you support a unique knowable flying fox whose loyalty and honor you respect rather than a voracious colony, a mindless community, a mass of rabbling mediocrity. You don't condone wishful thinking, which undermines the ability to confront one's predicament with forthrightness and dignity no matter the depredation, but you indulge your aspirations of influence, of relationship, of passing on what you've

learned of honor and pride and integrity, because at your age your other choice is to wither and die alone having effected nothing and no one. You take your nightly bloodletting like it's your choice. You live in a cage. The lowest-ranking clown visits each bleary-eyed morning to link-by-link winch up your head and its massive longhorns you can no longer support in case a nostalgic old man or unsuspecting child or curiosity-researching academic or world-weary monstrosity seeker or denouement-desperate consumer pays a quarter to see the last of the line of the Minotaur. The chain holds your head high. You hold your head high by a chain. Besides the clowns no one ever comes but the bat, in the dark, your head dropped, muzzle resting on the ground in a pile of dusty hay behind bars on a hillside of tormenting grass. Neither woman nor cow could be fertilized by you now. You are beyond perpetuation. No one fears you. They cage you. You take pride in your confinement, in the glory it references and concludes. You have no recollection of human flesh. The desire for it lives on as a vague insatiable craving, a savage lust, an incessant growling of belly, a desire for a scream, an impotent emptiness to which you are accustomed. Day-by-day you weaken, gracefully, full of thanks for the bat, for its ritual punctuality, for its sense of duty, for its reverence for your blood, for its brotherhood, for its ceremonious stealth, for how it hungrily laps the same old crimson you let nightly, for how it needs the only story you have to give, for its discretion in choosing a vein on the inner thigh of your right hind leg, for it choosing you as its fountainhead, for the negligence of the reeking clown who stumbles to your cage hungover every morning with a pitchfork and wheelbarrow of hay to feed you and remove your excrement and then raise your head and who stumbles to your cage drunk every evening to lower your head, sometimes with another clown with whom he copulates forcefully in the grass under the stars before you, a clown whom your presence frees to scream like a virgin cornered in the dead end of a labyrinth. You are not thankful for the scream that arouses you uselessly, animally, disgracefully, for how your arousal further arouses the screamer, which further arouses you, which further arouses the scream until you stand their drooling, hollowed, huge, erect, head yet chained high, forced to watch the screaming clowns, caged. You are thankful for the absence of spectators to witness what you've become, for the precision and keenness of the bat's teeth and the dull ache as it slices through fresh scar tissue, for its tongue on your skin, lapping your warm thick crimson, for how the world outside your cage night-by-night loses focus loses depth loses reality in the embrace of the bat on your thigh, for how you give your life to another, for how after the bat flies you can sleep a noble sleep free of maggot-riddled reflections and egg-laden memories and flyblown nostalgia for a life you cannot remember, a life that no

longer exists at 48.

32. XI.

You Screamed: You screamed where you sit. That you were unaware that you screamed is enough to make you scream. That you have so thoroughly lost control of your narrative that you can no longer go to the bathroom to emit your involuntary screams is nearly as unsettling. We're sorry to do this to you, but that's life – that is not what we agreed to say – but if you won't help yourself then we must help you help yourself by not permitting you to not acknowledge all possible screams by prematurely eliminating them in the toilet, which must be around here somewhere. You must own your possible screams, concede your possible involvement with the scream, elucidate your presence in the narrative rather than prematurely eliminate yourself from your account. If we have to literally tie you to your chair and metaphorically beat you – we agreed to say "cross-examine"!, yes but we compromised, some of us wanted to use "beat you with metaphors" – then we will do so. But since you have, under our cross-examination, – thank you – admitted that you may not have heard the purported scream, and since you tacitly acknowledge – compliantly! spinelessly! – the chance that you screamed the scream yourself, though we'd appreciate a more thorough explanation of why – a list! – of why you could potentially scream, we will allow – order – you to continue with your reason. We caution, however, that we are not entirely placated – satisfied – and we strive to appease – honor – incorporate even – the wishes of each of us, to ensure that none of us feel parenthetical. Therefore, this is not the time to leave your chair. You are to stay where you are in your filth. For our sake, to heal the divisions in us that your mute presence has instigated, continue, before we can no longer quell our pandemonium. What reason might you have had for your possible scream? Say something to reunite us.

53.

You arrive in a city's outskirts. Arrive is as wrong a word as saying that your unspeakable skirt delineates the border between the suburbs of whatothersimagineisno underwear concealing your urbancore and the uninhabited, unincorporated notyou out there, when in truth you don't wear underwear and your skirt is ineffable, where it begins and ends inexpressible, where you begin and end unclear and inconcise. That your nounderwear is characterized as whatothersimagineisno underwear and not no underwear or

unreferenced nothing is substantiation of the assumption of borders, of surfaces, of distinctions between here and there and us and them and you and me, of privates. There's no wearing your underwear. They don't make underwear for women like you; you are more women than you care to admit. They make most women's underwear for men. Up your ass crack like a thick g-string and you don't wear g-strings because you don't wear wedgies. You're nobody's whore, so you don't wear underwear. Your underwear characterization is on us. Nevertheless your "arrive" is a function of your personality: self-confidence, assertiveness, rectitude, not dithering or dickering or wasting words, but fucking choosing what to do and doing what needs done and letting the words lie where they land and suffering the consequences when they're wrong. Words are for others and you don't do for others; you constantly do things that are never worded and that therefore no one knows about but you do them anyway. "Arrive" is imprecise because it implies crossing a limit or border, a finality when what you experience is a discontinuous continuum, a gradual but inconsistent increase in the evidence of humanity – fencelines, an outletmall, the dump – but you don't give a shit. You move forward. You pass an enormous box building. A monstrous irrigator crawling in a potato field. A trailer park. Around ramping interstate exits cluster inviting establishments: Eat Here and Get Gas; Liquor in the Front, Poker in the Rear; Kum and Go. Farmland oscillates between industrial wasteland and office parks. The trees have been cut down, and where they've been planted they're ornamentals, doll trees that won't grow into powerlines but that will flower prettily come spring, or else they're overmature, towering Lombard poplars or maples or oaks planted generations ago by dead people to break the wind or dapple the sun or color the leading edge of winter red, orange, yellow. City trees, in the west. Minus the poplar, a pioneer tree. The apple trees of pickyourown orchards, semirural amusement parks for urbanites, cornmazes and ponyrides and goats, the purchased, unearned taste of the harvest. Trees logged or pruned or thinned or diseased or cleared for construction. Dying trees. Billboards obstruct the unattractive view, advertising shit – you don't truck with metaphor – economic excrement – these aren't billboards bearing Gatsby's great eyes, these aren't literary billboards, these are everyday toiletboards chasing you from your once-fled once-flushed flush-failed constitutionally-endowed Buy-This-Now life – the malodorous and offensive waste of commerce assaulting you more the less you want to do with it – not only are you nobody's whore, you're no john's client – marketing products of which you are unsure what the products are – an ideal? happiness? marketing of marketing? – of what purpose these products serve – facials and technological devices and insurances and religious messages and fish and private schools and

lawyers and septic services and billboards and charitable institutions and shining white teeth revealed by lips rearing in smile and baseball bats – products hitting on you with sleazy false images that you manage to largely ignore like catcalls and phalluses, distractions from the task at hand, which is what? Escape from your life? Personal entertainment? Acquisition of a purpose? Attainment of peace? Finding someone or something to make you scream? Digging up the sole individual worthy of your pizza? Words create desire. Advertising temptation. You won't feel the emotion the words put there. You won't be what the words make you. You are yourself. Fuck the words. You are motion. You slough thought and drive headlong down the freeway at evergreater speeds, weaving in and out of increasing traffic and flipping on your illegal sirens because you have to pee again – again? it's been forever, you've driven halfway around the world since you last peed – when a billboard flies by that hooks you, you fly by a billboard that lands with you, a subliminal flash, and despite your objections you try to remember what it was. In the trees, in the greenleafed canopy, a cupola or a pagoda or a hut of roughhewn lumber, the aurora borealis pink in the sky, an inviting bonfire. Words writ almost illegibly large in gothic script: HALFWAY THERE. Which makes you need to pee so bad you leak a few drips onto the upholstery if not leather of the driverseat and veer across four lanes of traffic with sirens blaring and pull onto the shoulder and jump out of the ambulance and down into the muddy ditch strewn with cigarette packs and beer bottles and composting Starbuck cups and squat protected from the sight of passenger cars and small trucks but in full voyeuristic fulfillment and onceagaingodamnit degrading objectification of large SUVs and tractor trailers and the hiredhand driving a combine down the outer road holding up the fetal suburban traffic desperate to get their kids to littleleague games on arable land, to get to the outletmall for a sale, to get home to their creekless Happy Creek subdivision, to get to the officepark for their humanity-bettering employment engendering transcendent personal growth and frictionless social networking, to get to the dogpark, and pee a torrent so painful ... you're birthing pee. You're prometaphor when you choose the metaphor, when it's not forced or coerced on you or shared with another, when you can choose its meaninglessness and its meaningfulness to your own satisfaction, but you're sure it's been years since you had sex. After the initial scorch the pissblaze is stunning. You're on fire, a good fire, a hot painless fire. Do people scream when ignited or engulfed or immolated? A roar fills your ears and you flicker and you can't breathe. It's gone. You gasp through aftershocks, reverberate with tremors, emit a high whine like somebody bowing a violin who doesn't know how to play the violin. You sigh and linger, singed, disregarding the passersby. You're not their object; it's like they're not there; you

decide they're not here. You squat, airdrying, evaporation cooling your seared parts, watching your scalding rivulet tinkle downstream toward the city through the legs of a billboard that you return enough to the hereandnow to finally see and of which you note a resemblance to the other – accommodating trees, vaulting architecture, the promise of boughs and sky, of ungrounded rootedness, of arboreal lifestyle, of woodland community, another encouraging Halfway There, and in fineprint at bottom right, a discrete Tree City, USA. At the limit of your sight you see another such billboard. In its direction your steaming urine trickles through the mud and arrives at 49.

32. XII.

Ear Infection: You sputter that you had the dreaded double ear infection – you remember it clearly because of the pain – and that could have caused you to either hear the scream that wasn't there – remember the phantom bells, high whines, and muffled cries as the pressure built against your eardrums – or to scream yourself from the pain, pressure, and phantom bells localized within each of your ears, one on each side of your head, not unlike an interrogator sticking a stiletto into each ear. You went too grandiose with the last comparative clause; you don't know how the possibly lethal stiletto-in-the-ear feels. But we reassure you, Yes, that is one of the many possible and reasonable explanations for both X and XI, and you have our sympathy. Don't worry, you say, both my eardrums have since burst. Which explains the yellow pus laced with blood leaking out your ears, we respond with disgust, and while we do appreciate explanations, we hadn't noticed the pus until you mentioned it. We hope we have not caused you permanent hearing damage by infecting you, and if we have, blame it on the contagion of your children if you have them. Continue. Autonomy over the story is in your hands. Use it, and stop with the excuses. We are only you, remember, and you are no more than we, there's nowhere to escape to, we are inside each other, continuing, forward motion, please, reason, from your mouth, from your chair, from your mind, continue.

32. XIII.

Nightmare: Stop. Don't continue. Telling us your dream is boring. Dreams, furthermore, amount to little more than excuses in stories. Go ahead, tell us about your dream, now is your chance, but know in advance we won't be listening.

54.

What if the Labyrinth is modern instead of ancient. This would account for the aseptic aspect. There hasn't been enough time for moss to grow, ants to infiltrate, bones to pile, dust to settle, roaches to scrabble, for its tale to be told and retold and corrupted and used for purposes the architect never intended, for cheap imitations to be made out of plastic by plastic people for other plastic people to buy with plastic, for resentment to grow over its industrial evolution, its incorporation, who owns its intellectual property, its commodification, whether the myth of its stone construction and human consumption is a fallacy concocted for branding, for a supernatural aura, for a thumb on your back, if it is actually made of paper or plastic and if it is universal or individual and if it ingests you, prefabricated with your prospective paths, or follows you, taking the retrospective shape of the path you create, if it doesn't exist until you pass through it, if it doesn't exist except as an idea bored into your head by plastic ants, by natural worms acting under their own volition, by remote-controlled insects that tunnel.

Maybe the Labyrinth is of the transition era between ancient and modern, the era when virtual realities moved from internal (conjured by imagination, facilitated by ritual or music or staging or spoken words or written words or read words or hallucinogenics or insanity, given life by the mind) to external (vision fed, image dominated, all-encompassing, immersive, role-playing) experiences that strive to replace your real reality with another to leave nothing to imagination to take over your real life with that of splattering monsters with the rocket launcher you chose from your array of assault weapons after dying myriad untold deaths, or with winning and losing wars against orcs depending on chance and how you disperse your paladins, or with building vast simulated cities and civilizations where you make certain early choices which can never be undone and time flows and your characters brutalize each other and innovate and reproduce and take over your world and take their clothes off for you if you look close enough.

Or the Labyrinth is of the era immediately before that era, that of the first role-playing videogame to subvert our surroundings, the first virtual interactive experience ever conceived, excepting board games and chess and card games and solitaire and word games and poems and dance and religion and sacrificial offerings: Pacman. You are alone; Pacman is alone. The stone walls are inexplicably smooth and impeccably fitted, perfect, too perfect, a fiction of walls made of impertinently large stones to imply eternity, like impossible Incan walls, like impenetrable computer-generated walls, the designer designing with nostalgia for an obsolete past form reliant on slave labor, with an aesthetic

derived from monumental works, without yet fully realizing the potential of his impending technology. There is a linearity in the Labyrinth's narrative structure that immersive videogames have abandoned as they've progressed and become virtual realities and subsequently realities. Your movements are restricted like Pacman's, up, down, right, left. You turn at right angles. You have a well-defined task to complete.

When you complete the Labyrinth, will you only move to a more difficult labyrinth? Or the same labyrinth with faster ghosts? Where are the ghosts? Are they ghosts of you moving among the passages? The full moons or gold spheres or Kix cereal that Pacman collects could be analogous to the Women of Gray's eye and the relief of Atlas, but that is only two balls of light when Pacman consumed so many. You are pursued, chased, but you can't see your ghosts. You move slowly under excessive limitations without changing direction quickly and something malformed and ambiguous and invisible chases you hems you in traps you closes in and where are the cherries?

You're a pie with a slice missing trying to fill your empty section, the acute triangle with one curved side, the absence in the neighborhood of $\pi/4$ radians. The circles you eat never complete your circle. They make you hungrier. Nuggets of Turkish delight. You consume and consume, moving faster snapping jaws furiously in ever greater frustration. You would be screaming if Pacman had a voice. Your world accelerates and the ghosts, wherever they are, where you were? around the corner?, gain velocity and intelligence, desiring you, obstructing your consumption, the ghosts' teeth set more determinedly along the bottom edge of their rectangles topped with half-circles, disembodied palates, floating mouths with the lower jaw removed. Perhaps that is why you cannot see them though you perceive the gravity of their approach: they are an immense cavity whose upper bound is marked by a thin lip, eyes in the gum, and teeth at bottom, and now you are touched and all freezes, your consumption over. Darkness. Stillness.

You know nothing until you start your consumption over at the beginning, your silent scream dying, a baby maniacally shoving Kix into its maw, a sufferer of mediocre depression popping pills, a material manifestation of spiritual greed ingesting suns.

The passages are so long and nowhere bound and if not perfectly linear still without anywhere to wind but forward or back, and you pursuing and pursued, ghosts before and behind hemming and hawing, you driven to constant motion without pause unless you pause the game except you're in the game you can't pause it and if you're at both the controls of the game and within the game because you're Pacman playing Pacman the scream that haunts you the scream

that you must face when you pause the game the scream you heard drives you back into this virtual reality an escape yes but an escape to nowhere and more than an escape a vessel for your hunger for victory and accomplishment and mastery and fulfillment. You run forward and back left and right unable to stop because there's no end to the maze, unable to escape the game you've chosen to play to escape your scream-saturated life, unable to get out of this life you're living in order to live a life more than life, a life conquerable, until you conquer it and satiate your insatiable appetite for suns or until you die enough.

You haven't died enough. Another intersection. Another torch-lit choice. Ghosts near.

If you turn south, wriggle forever to 90.

If you turn east, writhe twice forever to 156.

If you turn west, scuttle two times forever to 142.

32. XIV.

A Vile Creature: Someone screamed at the sight of a serpent, vermin, or insect, you suggest. Be more specific, we mentor. We screamed at the appearance of a snake, rat, or spider, you specify. Be more specific, we repeat, we who hate repeating ourselves. You screamed in shock, horror, and revulsion when you heard the rattlesnake's rattle shake, when the sewer rat ran across your chest, when the tarantula popped out of your shoe, when the green python's head poked from under your sheet, when the packrat climbed into your lap and stole your pizza piece, when the black widow rappelled down her silk and dangled her red hourglass before your eyes, when the cottonmouth coiled in your glass bit your lip and gave you cottonmouth, when the plague rat jumped out of the UPS package and latched onto the flesh between your thumb and index finger, when the brown recluse bit the hand that you reached under your blanket to determine if you do or if you don't wear pants -. Stop, we say. These are valid screams, as long as by "you" you mean you yourself. We did not scream these screams and besides this section of the list is reserved for possible reasons that you screamed. Continue.

55.

-- Do you have a hole in your lip?, she asks.

-- Do I?, you ask.

A hole does feel familiar, though you can't quite place it. A foggy memory of a fishing accident tugs at your lip, but you're not sure if it's your memory or a story someone told you. You hold your tongue.

-- There's a fucking hole there, but it might be nothing. Which is it?
-- Why are you contemplating me so intently?
-- Trying to figure if you know her.
-- Do I?
-- It'd be easier to recognize recognition in your face if she still had her head.
Or if we had it. If her head were around for you to recognize.
-- Yes, you concur.

Confusion distracts you from your sorrow, though now that you've made yourself aware of the distraction confusion does not distract you from your sorrow as well as it did. You are in your West Neighbor's living room, which you entered when you exited your basement. You've been here before, which feels weird since you've never been here. You've never imagined this scene, but you've thought it. There are two pieces of furniture or decoration or art. Two headless figures face each other, both erect, one a beautiful woman loosely wearing an open diaphanous gold robe through which shines her skin as if alive despite being headless, immobile, and drizzled in blood from the neck down, the other a stone statue of a man whose nude body, straining without motion, dusted lightly in rock powder from the neck down, is reminiscent of yours. You've probably never seen her before, but you recognize the magnificent, hourglass-shaped, incompetently-decapitated woman of slightly inhuman proportions whose exposed luster you long to touch despite her inertness, who is disgraced by a ragged neckline, as if her head were manhandled off without a blade, who is hard as concrete and soft as marble and smooth as a river-carved hollow when you graze the taught skin over her clavicle. You are pretty positive neither she nor he is your West Neighbor.

-- Don't touch. Where's her head?
-- That's what I was wondering.
-- Where's his head?
-- How should I know?
-- I'm beginning to think you know more than you know.
-- Why?

-- The foul language doesn't impress me. Dude has a remarkably executed headless stone statue of nude you in his living room: the walking stick, the incapability of movement, the private raised mole in your nethers that I've never seen but that I now know you possess, do you not? Has a thing about headlessness apparently, considering also the headless, may-as-well-be naked, inhumanely gorgeous woman. Explain.

-- I, I, I watched his house. A lot. From afar. He was grateful.
-- No. It's art. Don't justify it. It's a good statue, better for missing your head.

I mean explain our suspect's obsession with headlessness.

-- Identity?

-- See. You know more than you know. But that's not the whole story. You know more. You haven't stopped staring at her, swallowing her with your eyes, but you've taken note of nothing. You're barely here. Observe the trail of blood from her head getting drug off. Leads to the doorway through which we recently emerged. But the blood was not evident in the neighbor's basement.

-- My basement.

-- Precisely.

-- That's because that stairway has never opened into this house before.

-- Why do you say that?

-- ...

-- No trace of his head.

-- She could've been a prostitute. I watched lots of prostitutes coming in and out of this house. Though the flow's reduced of late. A man lives here, young, moneyed. I don't think I ever saw him. Perhaps he cut off his vices. Perhaps she was his last prostitute.

-- At least you're theorizing. If that's the case, I hope she castrated him, as a start. She wasn't violated, except for the removal of the head. There is no evidence of other physical contact. But there was a struggle.

Viola takes you by the hips and pushes you face-to-face with the headless statue of you, then turns you around to face the headless woman. She wriggles between you and your erect statue, pressed close to your back, her breath hot on your neck. With her foot she spreads your feet apart slightly, in the ready position. She unscrews and removes the top twelve inches of your walking stick, exposing a blade. She wraps your hands around the shaft of your whetted bayonet, with you raises it before you, and maneuvers your arms in such a way that your bayonet traces an arc through the air so that at full extension the tip grazes the nearest severed edge of the woman's neck. Your follow through is predicted by a diagonal line of blood splattered like a thin, side view of a galaxy running from wall to ceiling. Finished with you, she steps away and points to a rusty splotch, like a top view of a pressed, dried galaxy on the off-white carpet. You catch your breath and yourself from falling like a liberated puppet. She speaks.

-- Huh. You're standing in front of the statue that is an exact copy of you, inches closer to her. His stick sword thing wouldn't have reached her neck. Perhaps the hypothesis is disproved and the reenactment irrelevant. Nevertheless, there the head landed. Drug by the hair to the stairs to the communal basement. What does that tell us?

-- No sign of a scream.

-- Shut the fuck up. A scream's written everywhere. She was cut off mid-scream. Look at the blood sprayed on the ceiling from the force of her exhalation through her severed trachea like the erupting geyser of a whale's blowhole. Psychopathic. Forget your glass. Whether she was a prostitute or not, he tried to use her for his own stimulation and when she refused he lopped off her head, drug it to the door, and ate it, skull and all. Thus, the terminus of the blood trail. There, figured it. Sorry for my accusatory tone a moment ago. A bit of jealousy at you leering at this ostensibly female body, which establishes an impossible ideal for feminine beauty, and which even dead and without a head is obviously an order of magnitude more alluring than mine, itself never before slandered, in a very immaterial, ethereal, immortal way, a jealous suspicion whose seeds were sown when you were so affected by either the butchery you glimpsed or the nothing I experienced upstairs next door and you ceased to be affected by me.

Her diction reminds you of your wife if she was your wife. Which refocuses you on what's missing. Which brings you back to what happened to your statue's head, which could potentially be leering for eternity if not for its absence. Heads do not vaporize. Not in your kind of stories. You do not want Viola to be the one to find it, reattach it, and exacerbate her jealousy at that which it would stare. The jealousy must run its course so you can return to mourning your nothinged wife and children if they were yours (is the hollowness of their absence predicated on their previous presence? to justify your grief, must they have been yours on some level whether or not you had a wife and children?).

-- I'm certain I do not desire your affection. Now that I am once more objective, do you see what I see? Scattered shards of dreads. Shattered stone snakes on the floor. She was Medusa. Your sadness is understandable. You're my sidekick so you can't have me and even though she's headless, she's rock hard so you can't have her without breaking. But feel fortunate that she was decapitated prior to our arrival, or you could be this stone statue, another of her conquests. Her defeat should however move us to reevaluate the strength, fortitude, and resourcefulness of the morally bankrupt scream-inducer, as should the resemblance of the statue to you below the neckline, a statue perhaps made by her of a previous victim or perhaps made by him to commemorate his victory and foreshadow others. For now let us share a moment of silence/screaming for the beautiful/hideous prostitute/goddess killer/victim gorgon/woman.

You can't hear her for your grief welling, turning your heart to stone.

-- That should be sufficient. Let's see if we can corner this nefarious evildoer (her wordchoice reminds you of a once-upon-a-time son's) fantasizing in his bedroom at 51. Though there is also the trace of an indentation in the carpet.

Here, where all the nap (an infant you sang to sleep) is pushed over and muddy, where someone planted (the daughter with whom you gardened) their boot and ran toward the front door, which is unlatched, note. In which case he could be out plotting against other mothers and children and mythical whores and individuals trapped in handheld devices and worn men in Lay-Z-Boys (you). But first things first.

32. XV.

Your Hens: By which you mean to say, My hens, as we do not have chickens. Also, why would chickens make you scream? No, you say, the chickens screamed. Chickens don't scream, we say calmly. Have you, you inquire, ever grabbed a chicken by the legs and turned it over? If you were to do so, for instance when clipping their wings, or checking their vent, or right before you snap their neck, slice their throat, or chop off their head, you would hear them scream in their own way, a chicken way, often accompanied by a short burst of futile upside-down flapping, followed by a whimper, and then silence. This is not a list of possible victims, we don't go silent, but a list of possible causes of the scream. I'm saying, you say, that perhaps you are a chicken thief, like a fox or raccoon or coyote, and perhaps the scream was caused by you thieving one of my chickens and beheading or otherwise violating it. We have alibis, we bellow. We were not here. We would never touch a chicken's legs, we shout, because of the chicken shit smeared over them and our desire to not contract avian flu or gastroenteritis, and, we declaim, you are certainly out of possible scream causes and are stretching your logic to stall the question, What next?, because you don't know what next; you don't know how to determine which possible cause caused the scream; you don't know how to establish a victim or apprehend a motive or comprehend a perpetrator or capture a scream; and you are afraid if you stop listing reasons, if you desist from your logic, if you go silent for a moment, you will lose momentum and be unable to begin again, a victim of your own inertia, revealing what a bad detective, a bad storyteller, how bad at living you are.

You are me, you quake back at us from an ephemeral stillness, the shortest of quiets, toying with pronouns, stooping to our level. I therefore do not have to listen to you. I'm ending the pretense of talking to you, to all of you in me, to myself, of tolerating all possibilities in my story, of me telling my story, which I admit to doing poorly – Indecision makes poor detectives, we mumble as you tuck us in your back pocket and fold us

back into you and deny our discrete existence and believe you've silenced us— instead of living it, which I cannot assert I do well. I place the riot of voices behind me, where I end. I, you declare, hereby take the bootstraps, the reins, the horns of my story and sit in the driver's seat.

56.

As you arrive it's as if one of the vortex winds that arise at the intersection of worlds rips open the rear door of the ambulance on a moment you shouldn't

You soon discover that what you imagined was not underwear is not, be privy to, the pizza girl on top of a man who, though your angle looking from behind her up between your legs is neither one you are overly familiar with nor a standard used for identification such as full face or profile, you recognize is you, which is uncomfortable for a split second because you are your own voyeur and you

that the no skirt to speak of does not get in the way but does the opposite, which is not get out of the way, but rather the opposite of impedes, which is facilitates, acts as an aid or tool or assistant, that, in addition to her lip, her nipples and bellybutton and other parts of her it embarrasses you but not her to mention are pierced, and that the teardrop tattoos begin almost invisibly as tiny dark dots below her eyes, growing imperceptibly as they trickle down her cheeks and either side of her neck to her clavicles, where they pool and increase in size before they overflow the hollow where her windpipe demures into her chest, cascade down her sternum between her breasts and, contouring to the right of her belly, crash off her right hip, eddying there in another pool, the tears gathering themselves to run the rapids of her bouldered canyon

want to take your place, but you don't want to deprive yourself of the bliss you appear from your unique vantage to be experiencing. Instead of replacing yourself underneath her perhaps you could join them in their vault of glow-in-the-dark bursting stars and smiling suns and sickle moons, to share in the ecstasy, not to divide a finite joy like water rights and thereby reduce each of your shares but to partake of a renewable bottomless resource like bathing in a gushing river, or better to add to an infinite supply

before slowing again to a trickle of now hefty teardrops dripping down the inside of her left thigh, twining around the hamstring, winding around quadriceps,

like joining the water cycle and becoming evaporation and rain and the heaving ocean to augment the collective transcendence. You feel

hamstring, quadriceps, growing immense on the descent, fat wet globs of tears spiraling around the back of the knee, twirling around her shin and calf,

coiling around her ankle and flowing out her heel.

a scream coming and you no longer want to prevent it but to join it, to help create it, to sire it, to be part of it, to experience it, but you don't know how. You've never been in a threesome with yourself and ménage-a-trois is intimidatingly French. Do you just butt in? You persevere, on the cusp, in the doorway, outside and inside the ambulance, watching and participating, when the cold wind kicks up from behind

You have sex with your sidekick. You do what she tells you. She is on top of course, and from what you can tell is enjoying herself.

and picks you up and sticks you in the milieu and you are in yourself, one, coupled with yourself, coupling with her,

You're getting pretty excited about the coming scream, the genesis of which you can just hear building in her throat like a dam cracking, and you can't handle the excitement, you pull out of yourself, have an out-of-body experience, imagine watching yourself under her in the third person from behind her, yes, you cut to a porno camera position, and to get there you imagine yourself outside the door, opening the door, imagine yourself a voyeur, a stranger roleplaying as private investigator, and the door is flung open as if by a vortex and cold air blasts into the ambulance and

and your consciousness and sensation and perception and enjoyment of life expands dramatically, is so large that you cannot contain it, cannot possess it,

the vortex is full and thick with all the places it's been and bodies it's passed through and it fills you and

it's not yours, it's all, so complete that within it you can hardly perceive yourself or the young bald woman with whom you share this joyous existence,

you reenter yourself harder and larger than before, expanded, feeling more than you ever have, like you are present in all worlds and space and time, like you're making love with the cosmos, with Gaea, if that feels good, with God, whether God is a he or a she or both or neither, all united, coupling, and that's when,

you are one entity, voices unified, a moan begun, a siren sounding, a wail shaping in your throats, a scream birthing,

both her hands above her head, tears cascading, flowing, gushing, she clenches and screams and punches you in the face with a fist like an anvil, obliterating your nose: white pain.

black nothing.

When you regain consciousness you're in the back of an ambulance and you have a splitting headache and you wear a plastic nose. A girl in sweatpants and leaking breasts and a butch haircut and roundish tattoos bulging over her

protruding belly is telling you she's pregnant, no more scream chasing and detective playing for you, you're making the moral choice whether you like it or not. You're going to marry her whether you love her or not. You will support the scream you sired no matter if you sputter that it was fathered by the multitudes, men and women, who were present in the back of the ambulance on that fateful night, that its parentage might be attributable to the collective consciousness, that you are only microscopically responsible, or less, than --. You will not get a word in edgewise but you will give the scream a meaningful life full of opportunity so it doesn't have to deliver pizzas or be an extra in degrading horror flicks or whore itself out for unclimactic orgasms or live a life of crime or go into the military industry or contract security or private investigation profession or work whatever they're calling pointless unnecessary soul killing office jobs when the scream comes of age. So it will have the economic and social and psychological privilege of making choices, instead of having all choices made for it. The mother of your child tells you to take her to 195, and you do what she tells you.

57.

There's no answer at your West Neighbor's. Which is a relief because now you don't need to talk to your West Neighbor on the phone. You've watched a steady stream of women young and old, haggard and stately, resigned and nervous, expensive and discount and wholesale and aftermarket, arousing and repulsive, sexy and homely, frightening and businesslike and enticing and emotional and mature and innocent, coming and going, in and out and in and out and in and out of his front door. All body types have been welcomed, thick, thin, top-loaded, bottom-loaded, unloaded. He's been testing the waters, you suppose, in search of a mate, tasting the fish, traveling the seven seas without leaving the comfort of his home. He's having a hard time choosing, you imagine. But at least he has proceeded systematically, you presume, though from your distance and through two windows you've been unable to read the spreadsheet of names and defining characteristics and backgrounds and performance evaluations and integer ratings on his computer screen. No women come or go from your West Neighbor's house tonight, but it's late, you think, looking out the window, or maybe not late enough. You can't be sure if your young professional bachelor neighbor didn't answer the phone because he is busy reading on his electronic reader, or he left his phone in the car, or he left it off on accident after shutting it off on purpose because he hadn't wanted to be interrupted (a meeting of the minds at work, a meeting of the spirit at church, a meeting of the bodies at yoga), or he's screening his calls because he hates talking on the phone (has a set

schedule with the prostitution dating service so he needn't call, orders pizza online, chats with friends on Facebook, only answers the phone when his mother calls, if then), or he's interviewing a woman, or he's not home, or he's crumpled on the ground, head bashed in with a fly rod, strangled with a stout stick, stabbed ad infinitum with a sledgehammer, reparation delivered by all those women he only desired to have sex with, or he lost his voice screaming at a pulp horror movie (you never claimed to know him well, or at all), or he's dismembering a service provider either because the provider didn't provide the service or because he's sick, chronically unhealthy, under the weather, diseased in the head, or because he did answer and you couldn't hear him due to your lingering temporary partial deafness resulting from a recent double ear infection. There is still a scream in your ears after all.

Giving up on your West Neighbor, call your East Neighbor at 127.

Not giving up on your West Neighbor, follow the dried-up streambed of women to your West Neighbor's front door at 181.

Having performed your neighborly duty, you give your responsibility to the scream to the cops, whom you call at 158.

You consider texting your West Neighbor, but you're in the process of giving up on communicating with the written word. Besides, you are operating under the artifice that your telephone does not text and that text is not a verb but a once-upon-a-time key to civilization and an inefficient if unavoidable contemporary transport of information and a gross future impediment to thought transmission. You are concomitantly proceeding to give up on the spoken word, and hence the telephone, but you have one more bodily need to answer, you are hungry, one more emotional state to communicate, you are hungry, one more local call to make, you are hungry, at 32 before you fully process the scream, on which you have not given up, without the distraction, drain, and fallacy of communication.

58.

You continue to not have sex.

It doesn't matter.

You either say goodbye with some sadness and relief and thereafter live alone or you live out your life as the pizza girl's platonic pizza delivery sidekick. Either way, you don't squirrel away her antipathy. You let it roll off you like water off a duck's back. But you do retreat turtle-like into a self-protective shell. No consummation is worth more rejection. Consummation is short-lived; rejection is forever. Either way, you give up on chasing the rabbit of a scream.

Your life is not appreciably different whether you choose to be a chaste assistant or a virtuous hermit. Either way, you accomplish nothing that will be remembered. Don't get us, your witnesses, wrong; plenty of things happen to you throughout the duration of your life, but they're not pertinent to us, add little to your story, have nothing to do with screaming -- your pizza girl boss never becomes your dominatrix, for example, and if you achieve enlightenment your complete comprehension is not something you can communicate -- and are ultimately uninteresting.

Eventually, as a wizened sidekick or a solitary troll with eremitic pretensions, you go to 2. Until then you are free to imagine all your possible happenings, but you'll do it alone. We won't be with you.

59.

She leads you, unmoored by what some of you might have done and hence who you may be, unbelieving in what you think you saw, undone by gross loss, by the hand. You lead her, disturbed by or distant with or displaced from the nothing she says she encountered upstairs, by the hand. You have no hands to lead or be led by, one full of walking stick, one encumbered by your massive magnifying glass which, reunited with your walking stick, may again be attached to it in the manner of a handle by your grievous thoughts. No not back through the office where your defaced, impotent body is an accusation: either you created the scene or scenelessness upstairs (a diseased mind's product? to satisfy a need for something outside yourself? as the instrument of a being higher than you?) or you reclined while another did (fleeced reason and fabricated purpose stuffed in your ears like two bits of moth-eaten wool blanket to ineffectually block out the siren scream while fictitiously pursuing it without motion) or there is nothing upstairs, possibly no upstairs, and you clothe it to give it form like white sheets draped on emptiness, ghosts of furniture in a room in your mind (creating a disgraced world like a deity? to infect others with you? to make of your empty mind a theater?). Not through the office, where you then submitted to or were submitted to torture and mutilation and a long misery followed by death-in-life, either to feel pain and endure atonement and suffer some certainty and perhaps even commit to an answer, a confession, a version of truth, or for love. Not the

office, where you pulled your plug and/or you didn't, where there is a chug hum hiss and/or silence, where you are dead and/or braindead and/or playing possum. Not the office again, where the evidence has been collected, where there is nothing left for you, where your corpus lies comfortably in agony if it retains a shred of consciousness. Down then, down the stairs that go under the stairs that went upstairs, downstairs to the basement, where there must be something more than nothing, more evidence, more hair and blood and DNA and indentation and love letters and suicide notes and manifestos and religious texts and philosophical treatises and science, more intention, more motive, more explanations, more addictive precision to clarify what happened, more debasement. The basement is unfinished. Spiders, bare concrete, darkness, a solitary bulb, a metal table, dampness. Maybe the kids if there were any used to play Dungeons and Dragons, Minotaur, or The March of the Ants down here. Perhaps on occasion you would have sex with your spouse if there is such a thing on the table when you made a sex date and didn't want to wake the kids. Your arousal by or for or at Viola is dissipated due to what was encountered and unencountered upstairs. Now is not a time for stimulation but for surrender and submission and single-mindedness, better no-mindedness, for forgetting who you are, for admitting that you are nothing after upstairs. You can do it; you are don't forget dead in the office. You admit you are Viola's sidekick; a detective of her integrity would never have sex with her sidekick, even if it's sympathy sex with one who has lost everything he loved including himself.

On the table: a piece of technology. It's small. Handheld though no hand holds it. For communication, the communication of information, you don't care, why care about communication at a time like this? Everyone who loved you and whom you loved if there ever were any such are gone. You don't know why you took up residence in the chair before you were tortured, before the scream, before the acts that caused the scream. You are useless, and you feel guilty in your inaction, and you may be guilty in your actions. Is life worth living now? It is not. You cannot see what's on the technology's screen it's so fucking small. Slick. Molded. No keys or buttons or ports. Viola takes the giant magnifying glass from your hand. Your worth: bearer of the unbearable magnifying glass, the beast of burden, the narrative voice, the donkey, horse, mule, yak, Sherpa, ant. She peers through your glass at the screen. She draws you in beside her. Magnified in the screen is a man who looks familiar. He does not resemble you. He has your nose, that's all. A stick like yours, but with a crook on top. He's missing a hand and an eye and his hearing. A trench coat is wrapped around him like bat wings, a hood pulled low over his brow. He is supine in a box in the handheld technology without room to move. His eye is open. With the coat and

cowl and sallowness and sunken eye and curved stick and single-handedness, he looks like death. It's unclear if he's alive or dead. She moves the magnifying glass up and down, focusing on different depths in the screen. The camera taking the picture which you are examining on the screen is in a recess in the box. You then are there also. The recess's black edges frame the picture. In the extreme foreground are what appear to be a glass vial bearing the skull and crossbones or the fluorescent toxic symbol or the sour yucky-face sticker, and a hammer supported by a trip mechanism.

Viola knows or adapts or learns how to use the technology and scrolls through an endless series of pictures in which his forehead and face are huge and near and his feet are tiny and distant. On occasion a picture shows the hammer fallen, the vial shattered, but in the next the vial reforms and the hammer is again poised. The man never looks any different. You think his grimace tightens or loosens, but you think you're projecting your grimace onto him. A mouth breather or a non-breather, his lips remain slightly parted. His one eye does not close. Did his face just flex, expressive of greater effort? Is he struggling against his confines, writhing to escape the box without writhing because he cannot move, struggling futilely but struggling? In such a picture you know he is unequivocally alive. But in the others, equivocation. In the pictures where you detect no effort, no struggle, is he dead? And what of now, while you examine captured images of him? Is he still in the box? Trapped in a picture? Freed? Is he alive or dead? If he is dead in a single one of the seemingly infinite pictures, must he now be dead? If there were a definitive answer, you might like to climb into the technological contraption, to be in this box either alive without choice or dead, or both, to be alive and dead (rapture or purgatory?) to be a technology tiny and handheld and inessential except as a coveted commodity and already obsolete. Viola scrolls faster and faster, searching for an end, a finality, and the pictures fly by like a flip book but with less enchantment, like a moving picture but with less transport, like an animated movie but with less animation. If Viola ever reached the end, perhaps you'd have an answer. The hammer rises and falls and rises and falls, the glass shatters and coalesces and shatters and coalesces. For much of the time, the hammer hangs, awaiting its release, its leap, its free fall, and the vial sits, awaiting annihilation. Through all the captured moments the man remains. Immobile. Immobilized. Unchanging. Grimacing or not. Numb by the repetition, the changelessness, the lack of development, or desperate to explain or escape such a condition. You begin to suspect that the photographs are not sequential, not chronological, or not exactly. The man is either alive or dead, your reason asserts; he cannot be dead and then alive. The pictures could be of a single event, fractured, of which the man's death is the

resolution. You clutch at the device. The technology is at fault. Due to its own deficiencies, or time's, it must show the pictures one after the other. It fails to accurately represent the layering, the simultaneity, the synchronicity of events depicted and undepicted in the pictures. Is it not then, you undercut yourself, that the events are one, but that the events are multiple and concurrent involving the same man in the same box? The same man cannot be in different boxes that are the same. You are about to dive into the rabbit hole after the semantics of same and resolution and death and synchronicity, but Viola pockets the victimized technology in her cleavage.

-- We'll never find more body to this one. He has no reality for us except within this device. He's a string of ones and zeroes. The relevant question isn't whether he's alive or dead. The relevant question is if he crawled into this suicide contraption of his free will, or if he was coerced. And if, within his box, within the pictures, within this technology, he screams. And if his scream is the scream we cannot hear.

As so often, you are rendered silent. There is no exit from the basement except that by which you entered. She hands you the glass to carry to give you some reason to be and leads you back upstairs to 55.

60.

Clouds move in from the west. The mountain is cast up in shadow on their underbelly by the rising sun. You leave the screaming cat far behind and fly to the mountain you can't see, an image of it imprinted in your brain, a reflection of your time-lapsed sound, silent emitted waves mirroring back to you contoured by distance and shape and relief, attenuated by the absorbency of the surface and the inertia of air. You backtrack your echo to the mountain, tossing your ultrasonic click ahead of you over the trees and silos and oil derricks and windmills and cell phone towers in laconic pulses -- you are teeth and wings and a bellyful of blood, not some hyper mosquito-chasing insectivore -- following the map made by your silent noise, licking your lips, laboring, the weight of blood in your stomach equal to your own, striving to reach your hole in the mountain before the sun peaks over its shoulder, not because you'll turn to stone or burn alive or die from the shame of your blood-sucking ways exposed to the day, but because in the light you may be preyed upon by hawk or falcon. The reflection of your screamed pips, the mountain, looms. In a sheer wall of high ultrasonic echo, you detect a silence, hear a familiar hole, flutter into a cavity which does not speak your voice, does not repeat your every sunrise-blasted utterance at you, does not echo every pip, yelp, squeak, bark, scream, shriek, song you unconsciously toss off back into your consciousness but instead

reflects them in all odd directions off internal facets angular and convex and concave, the cave shattering your sound, absorbing it into the body of thousands of other bats, drowning it in the intermingled murmur strum mumble hum of thousands of you, swallowing your voice as it has thousands of bats, as it does you, the last bat back, echoing home off your feline prey into the mouth of the mountain that belched you at dusk. From your feet you hang from the ceiling. You are indistinguishable from the others, paper wings webbed between prolonged fingers, spreading, stretching, folding, wrapping, cocooning, holding in heat, foxface hanging, holding in fangs. A neighbor reeking of hunger licks at your armpits. His hunger is yours. Your lips part. Your mouth opens. You embrace each other with your wings. His lips close around yours and you vomit warm blood into his mouth, up his throat, into his belly. He licks your lips, then his, and climbs off you. You are no less sated for your generosity. Tomorrow your neighbor who is as much you as you will hunt well and drink his fill and share with another who fails. Another will share with you, you will share with another, the blood will be swapped, spread equally, mouth-to-mouth, belly-to-belly, bat-to-bat, your multitudinous lives inseparable, your one life inviolable. The blood spreads. You are each bat, a community, a cooperative colony, a single entity disgorged at sundown into the night of 52, disseminating in every direction, hunting cutting drinking the blood of sleeping cattle and songbirds and deer and cats and children in beds and foxes in dens and chickens in coops and pigs in pens and rats in pipes and rabbits in hutches and an old bull in a cage and snoring humans with heads tipped back and books face down and open on their chest like wings stabilizing a perched spine, pages protecting a hungry mouth latched to a breast, and wolves and bears and goats, not draining life but supping on it, leaving life for the next night, saving life, sharing your anticoagulated awareness, drinking warm blood, drinking green grass under hoof and between teeth, drinking wind in your feathers, drinking the stretch of egg pushing through your tubes, drinking the sent of a sow, of a trembling elk calf, of a cornered fawn, drinking the vibration of the lunar howl beginning in your larynx and spreading through your body, drinking the orgy of rabbit copulation, drinking the power and fear and indifference of burning ants under your magnifying glass, drinking singing a melodious sunrise song, and reconverging in a conversant echo of vicarious experience communicated through communal blood swooping from the concave sky at dawn.

61.

Gas station middleofnowhere. No trees. No nothing but road and gas station and vehicles and barrenness. You don't need gas. You drive a biodiesel

ambulance. Vehicles fuming lined up for the pumps like kindergartners in the cafeteria or anywhere. You need badcoffee. Snow's gone gray. No town in sight. Thaw is on. Hundreds of tourists in minivans and weekend travelers in SUVs and getaway artists in sedans and a few rundown locals in rundown pickups. You bypass the wait for ass-rippingly priced unleaded and park in the handicapped spot and step out into this densely-populated nowhere made small by the vast nowhere surrounding it, a swallowed seethe contained by curb. They all stare. You stick out like a sore, bald, tattooed woman just past her prime or fuck you in her prime in no skirt to speak of strung out from the road driving an ambulance. In the generic convenience store you fill a giant styrofoam cup with black coffee. You cut a brat who an overweight lady plunked in the checkout line while she finishes shopping. Kid says, You look like Snow White, and his mommy says, Now Honey she's a soiled dove, and you talk only to the boy and say, Nah handsome, I've started to sag. He says, Oh I'm sorry to hear that, I didn't notice, and you say, I'll give you a kiss if you give me a dollar. He gives you a dollar that you give to the overthehill cashier with teased hair sweettalking everybody for the coffee and give him a kiss on the mouth no tongue, maybe a little tongue. His mommy screams and calls you a slut and accuses you of besmirching her son's innocence and stealing his virginity from his mouth and if she only knew where his daddy was she'd have him give you a piece. Boy takes another dollar from her hand to pay for his bottle rocket and fun dip and says to you, Thank you Ma'am, you're worth every penny. You ask the cashier, How far to the city?, and she says, The one with the trees?, and you say, Duh, and she says, You're halfway there from that reststop, and she doesn't stop talking, That ass about to fall out of your noskirt, but use it while you got it sugar, 'cause you gonna look like me soon, like a -. Flee before she sullies you with her imagery, away from the consumers painting you with their fossilized desires, sacrificing nonrenewable you to absolve themselves, purchasing oily ablutions at their convenient mecca. Feel alienated. Alienate. Wave to the gawkers. Whistle while you work. Pumped on caffeine and tapping a beat with your fingers on the pizza box, pull out of the gas station onto the interstate in the direction of 53.

32. End.

And that is what you do, you who are us, you who will confuse us by reinstating an old numerology, you who yet rely on our indented format though you've supposedly quit list making. You are racked by doubts about how to proceed. Getting up from your Lay-Z-Boy is out of the question. You chose the vessel of your quest; you cannot change your past choices; you cannot be everything and everywhere and everyone in one

life. You chose your chair because you're sure the truth about the scream is within you, but you have realized that your techniques for extracting truth from yourself need to expand beyond reason – there's a part of you that does not respond to logic, not to mention another part of you that can always out-logic your logic, in addition to another part of you that reasons that the winner of the logic game holds no special claim to rightness, besides the part of you that is enchanted by and cowers from others' logic because it is much more reasonable than your own, as well as the part of you that fears the abyss and clings to reason like a life preserver, and to give voice to just one more part of you – or you'll put yourself to sleep, not like a dog, like a person reading a story before bed, and it will be difficult to coerce yourself into divulging the truth about the scream while you sleep – the part of you who laughs and answers nothing. Or would it be easier while you sleep, such as with hypnosis or truth serum? No, you've never cared for that word, serum. And relinquishing control by being put under hypnosis while maintaining control by putting yourself under hypnosis ... would be admirable, but you're not there yet. For one you don't believe in hypnosis and you are not yet far enough advanced to resort to means you do not believe in. Are you a sleeptalker? But can you hear yourself sleeptalk? Perhaps you could record yourself. The idea of stepping outside of yourself doesn't bother you – it's more provocative than recording yourself sleeptalking. Recording is a mundane surface technique practiced by all walks of detectives, a technology without possibility for insight into you beyond the words you say. If you are going to operate on you in an act of penetrating self-discovery, you will be the one to do it. Because or although you don't believe in total submission to surgeon or psychiatrist or creator or hypnotist. You also don't believe in exercising complete control over yourself or existence or in authoritarianism. Which gives you an idea:

You step outside of you to have a civil conversation with yourself and ascertain the truth about the scream. While it is true that you are going back on your word – your words about not talking to yourself anymore – this will be somewhat different because you will be outside of yourself and therefore you could be interpreted as being two different yous talking to each other, you in the chair, you out of the chair, which would permit you considerable liberties with yourself at 66.

You create a character in your head, a character like you and unlike you, a character with a deformity, such as a nub for a right hand or a pot belly so large his or her sexual organ is hypothetical or blindness in one eye or perhaps most

appropriately total deafness, because nobody's perfect, most especially your avatar – no, your character is not your avatar – your child – your character is not your child – your platonic ideal – the deformities – your character – no, your character is not an invented non-entity but a being, a searcher, a detective, a spore of awareness blown from your stem, conscious of itself and its surroundings but not of you, autonomous and free to make his – you decided on him by sexist default – own choices except you instill in him one insatiable desire like an involuntary muscle, a heart: to discover the scream, to ascertain the scream, to determine the scream, to make the scream yours, to ingest it, consume it, kill it, make love to it, not in that order, you're not mentally ill, not in any order at all, all at once, the desires are one, one desire difficult to explain and put into words and achieve. Which is why you create a being who does not need to put into words but who acts. You release him into the world, out your front door without you who begat him. You will remain, but he will be your eye, your nose, your hand in a world from which you are cloistered, a world you can barely imagine and hardly perceive, monastic in your chair. Be conscious of all he is conscious of in addition to what you're conscious of and thereby inhabit a higher state of consciousness reclined in your chair, seed spent, a seemingly dormant state without thought as you know it but consisting of absence and everpresence, of everywhere and nowhere and here, of inside and outside, of desiring the scream at 64.

62.

What you think about in your tiny tunnel of forever:

Why ask why when you do not control your surroundings, cannot exert any effect on the walls which house you, have no influence on the demands made of you. What you control is your choices under the imposed conditions. If you could effect the imposed conditions, then you would be saddled with other choices. But you cannot. You could have that sort of influence if you wanted it: it is your story. You could break the rules and make new ones. But you do not. You could, if you were sufficiently greedy, needy, prideful, aspiring, self-actualizing, and/or aware. But you are not. You are happy enough, if terrified you will never escape, to have what is expected of you clearly defined, even if the nature of the Labyrinth is undefined, of unknown layout and material and method of construction and architect and dangers and purpose. Stone and light and lightlessness, but you mean a thing more basic like "of what matter." You appreciate the rare opportunity to both actively perform heroic deeds and submissively participate in your limited story. But again, what you want does not matter.

You penetrated the Labyrinth; you read its instructions; by reading and entering you agreed and are legally and morally bound to the stipulated impositions. Some walls you must learn to accept or else kill yourself or else do significant brain damage beating your head against them. Don't worry about their origins. Worry about where to find Atlas, and the eye of The Women of Gray, and the two-way door again, and how, as the passage's walls narrow and squeeze your chest and your inhales shallow and your exhales deepen, you will manage to continue breathing until you reach another chamber. You do.

You think. Forever ends. Your chest expands. The chamber is lit fitfully by a torch. Walls of stone. Three narrow passages exiting, from one of which you just entered.

If you turn north, then slip forever to 114.

If you turn south, then wriggle forever to 137.

If you turn east, writhe forever to 109.

63.*

Viola pats you on the back. Her cleavage is laden paper and plastic baggies and her no skirt to speak of is heavy vials. Her pate is glistening sweat.

-- The girl's limbs are under her blanket. Worst crime scene I've witnessed. Evidence galore. He either wasn't very smart or his thoughts were drowned in emotion and rage and psychosis. We'll nail the fucker to the chair.

-- What monster ...?

-- Whoever did the guy downstairs. He must be the father. Unless the guy in the chair did this and someone else did him for gruesomely killing his family. Penance or whatever.

You? Are you the man downstairs in the chair? You are the author of your story. Are you capable of such dehumanizing assault? Are you an animal? Less than? You don't remember doing it. You don't remember not doing it, and you don't remember their screams. You heard a scream. If you did it, was it by your agency? If not, whose? You admit negligent inaction but not heinous action. Passive puppetness, but not repugnant, hubristic, nauseating puppeting. Are you the you in the chair? It is impossible; you are upstairs. But you were. He is mutilated and you are not, despite resemblances. Yet as one and the same man you shared a wife and three children. Not shared, you didn't have to share, you were he. Are his wife and children the same as yours? Do you have a wife and children? Perhaps he did and you do not. Is that possible if you are the same? Perhaps his are dead and yours are not. If the you in the chair is guilty, are you? If he was tortured mortally by the murderer, were you? If he screamed, did you?

Who tortured him? You don't know without doubt that he was the murderer. There is no more evidence you've been here, upstairs, than he, or any others of you. If there is the you in the chair and the you here now on the step, then other yous must be possible. How do you seek vengeance on yourself? You cannot say for certain which you did it, if you did it, which you cannot conceive of. At least until the unknowns and incongruities and inconceivable violations tucked empirically between Viola's breasts and into her negligible skirt are analyzed and interpreted and puzzled together. The lack of visible evidence of you upstairs in your house is undeniable. Clothes, yes, but stacked and mothballed in a trunk and folded and creased in drawers and hung, sheened with dust, in your closet. No toothbrush or deodorant or glasses case in the bathroom. No books on the nightstand. No pens or journals or post-its. No photographs of you on the walls. No memorabilia boxed under the bed. Your absence here is a presence. Your presence now emphasizes your absence.

-- He's no Hercules, you mutter. There are no Labors to expiate his actions.

-- Let's shut the fuck up with references overly obvious to some and obnoxiously obscure to others and let the evidence talk.

She returns the glass and walks downstairs toward 59. Maybe you'll get tears tattooed on your skin. But why? You want to die, or to have died alongside your wife and children in a gory agony. If you kill yourself too late, is the gesture meaningless? You don't want to incriminate yourself by suicide if you didn't do it, though you did nothing to stop it. There's a difference there, if only a hair. In lieu of your walking stick, put your hand on Viola's gleaming head and let her lead you to the killer, the scream author, the delusional or empathy-deprived or megalomaniac perpetrator, to emotionally butcher him, to punish him beyond the fullest extent of the law, to enact your loss on him. To make him feel like you. Whether he is you or another hardly matters. To make you all witness, all feel your pain, all the same. All your love has been torn from you.

63.

Viola sits you on the top stair when you go lightheaded or dizzy or nauseous and are almost crushed under your magnifying glass, which she borrows without strain. From the bedrooms she collects samples of hair and blood and dentition and charred skin and semen and flesh under fingernails and chunks of meat between teeth. They fought. They did not go quietly. Hold your head in your hands. Close your leaking eyes. Weep at what you've seen as it's projected again and again on the back of your eyelids, projected from your rods and cones onto the curtain of skin you've drawn closed, projected on a bloody sheet held up to the light. You hid them in a haze of uncertainty (your-wife-if-you-have-one,

your-children-if-you-had-them) to protect them from the perils of your detecting, from becoming collateral damage, from the public eye, from suffering, from being the victims of retribution, from experiencing pain, from becoming bodies, evidence, yes, to save them from becoming evidence of the malignancy, the deficit, the void in man that made you take up this ill-begotten quest in the first place. Did you choose this quest in submission to the void or defiance, to please it or quell it, for or against it, to scream or to end screaming? Does it matter, now, with the new question: Who did this to your wife and children?

-- Tearing. Blood. Hairs ... not hers. Happened before she was gutted, as evidenced by the bruising. There ...

The sound of a vial unscrewed. Swabbing. Rescrewed.

Now your final memory of your children's voices is not their squeals of delight or chortling laughter or I love you's or rambling neverending monologues full of death and gore and animals and vindication but lacking in rising action or greetings of Daddy! or Mommy! or baby babbles or Wow's when they poop in the toilet or cries when they bonk their head or their ear aches or they're tired, weary, but the screams you didn't hear and the one you did as they were slaughtered while you sat downstairs. Your last image of your wife isn't her face while making love on a mountain under a blue sky or when she first sat reluctantly on your lap beside the ocean or her straining body wracked in pain giving birth or the unfortunate set of her mouth in concentration but her body on its back on your stained sheets, bruised on the face and forearms and thighs, blood dry and brown, stomach C-sectioned and guts piled beside her. That image superimposed on the picture of you sitting in your chair. Vomit into your hands.

--The children were not violated. Don't feel so bad. It's your first case, happens to all of us. Could use a hand when you stop wretching.

You dry heave. For some reason you don't want Viola to know this is your family terrorized, your wife butchered, your children murdered. Maybe because of your guilt at having done nothing to stop it, caught up in thought games and existential teasing and cheap philosophizing about screams. And maybe your sense of guilt is lawfully justified. Maybe your inaction could be classified as negligent, as aiding and abetting a felony, as assisting a crime, as homicide. You want to catch the killer, not be caught yourself. You cannot kill the killer or make him suffer or violate him or take from him everything that gives his life meaning, that lends it intrinsic value, that brings him joy and tolerable frustration, that answers the why in a way a string of words never will or use his pain to replace your loves if you are incarcerated. You found your daughter disjointed in her closet, face frozen in fear. Your son was half-flayed in the slick

bathtub. Your infant screamed herself to death in her crib, untouched. Your interest in the case is no longer theoretical. Your investigation with Viola as your sidekick or you hers is no longer for the good of mankind or for some person you do not know or even for you. Your participation is not for the good of anybody. It's for the fulfillment of one purpose: to force someone else, the culprit or anyone or everyone, to feel the way you feel. That will be your vengeance. Only then, the case complete, will you cease feeling and be able to terminate your awareness. *

64.

You stand on the porch. Your left hand rests on your belly under a shabby overcoat or cape or poncho or robe or shroud or perhaps it's a moth-eaten woolen blanket wrapped around your shoulders. Your right nub itches your empty left eye socket. Against the doorframe leans your hooked staff or bent walking stick or cane or gaff or poleax or spear or farming implement such as a hoe or scythe or long-handled pruning saw. You hear nothing. No children screeching, no couples arguing, no lovers cooing, no babies crying, no TVs blaring, no laugh tracks laughing, no bass thumping, no cars starting, no dogs barking, no raccoon snooping, no cats prowling, no breeze in trees, no birdsong, no violin, no plucked guitar, no snow falling, no oceanic roar of the distant interstate, no hum of the city, no nature of the country, no crickets or frogs or mice or roaches or sirens or doors, no screams, no non-screams, no voices, no voices in your head talking to you because you've never heard a voice, no thumping of your pulse in your ears. A silence parents and outdoorsmen and thinkers think they seek but within which they would weep. A silence hypothetical and impossible for those who hear. A silence inescapable and mundane for you. There was a scream here. You can smell it.

You breathe in the sharp night air and go to 68 without moving, lizard still.

65.

The pizza is also gone. You're curled under a few-inch blanket of snow that whitewashes the drainage ditch, softens it, warms you, which is nice because you don't want to get up and search for some dumb dog. You're not up for an unnatural or radical or progressive or innovative or avant-garde or revolutionary act of reverse predation. You want to laze and lounge in your basket of snow-blanketed plastic grass. You think about your yellow eyes and their black vertical slits peaking out of the snow and how if you lowered your head under the cap of snow that must be why your head feels so heavy you would disappear even from your thoughts. You yawn. Where is the dog? Did it go home to its master?

Where is home? Could you find your way back if you were so inclined? You are not. It was a long chase and you don't have a canine's sense of direction. The dog will bark for you, you're sure. He'll get bored without you. When he returns, looking for a good time, for something to play with, to chase around, to amuse him -- he won't snap your neck; you're no vermin -- you'll stand and arch your back and stick your tail straight up like a lance and stand your hair at attention and hiss and drive him off. That's what you'll do. And if he proves a worthy adversary, you'll claw his sensitive muzzle and droopy eyes until he yelps and turns tail and runs to his man for consolation and leaves you blessedly alone. Yes, when he comes back to you. You groom yourself under the snow blanket. You taste like meat and old blood and hair. You reflect on how you haven't brushed your teeth since you supped on your neighbor's neck and how satisfying the meal was, but how little the taste of his flesh told you about the man, which are thoughts you've previously thought. You think them again. You yawn and sleep and wake more tired than before. It's still night. Have you slept through an entire day and into the next night? Did you miss splaying in a puddle of sun? You shiver. Your blanket of snow is undisturbed, tucked to your neck, thank god. That goddam dog. Why you didn't stand your ground in your backyard and scare him off you don't know. He hasn't the stomach for you. He's soft and man dependent. You could've had your fun with the rat then. The chase, that's why. You could've scared him off, sure, but the rat would've escaped. The dog was essential to the chase. He kept you chasing when you would've quit for apathy. The cur. Thank god you have no need for the goad of companionship and you can relax alone without his perpetual instigation. Though you'd tolerate his shit for a few minutes if he brought you a saucer of milk. Milk gives you the shits. Where is that dog to service you? You hear nothing but a light breeze from which the ditch shelters you. The snow swallows all sound. White snow, black sky, softened litter, buried corpses, star flakes falling from the heavens. Fucking dog. Vapid, tail-wagging, face-licking, scrap-begging, submission-addicted dog. A dog gives nothing you need; it's fooled man into thinking he needs that nothing you need; but not you, you're a cat. With an apathetic desire for a scream. A rodent rustles beside you. Your adrenaline heaves you up on your forelegs and the rodent flutters off, scattering a bit of snow, and silently blends into the black night of 60. The snow next to you is stained in blood. Red on white, That's pretty, you think. The rodents? Yours? Yours is not the only blood that is red. You're not in pain. Just a knick. A dull ache maybe, or a welling, but mostly tired. Cold. You lick your shoulder, as close to your neck as you can, part of your neck even with your long rough tongue slickening with blood. A dribble. A nothing. A shadow flying away. A flight of fancy your solitary mind connected

to a slight cut from your basket, which could be a coil of #9 wire rather than wicker or maybe the green plastic easter grass is in fact oxidized copper wiring or the wound could be from some rusty hacksawed rebar or string of barbwire or jagged glass shard you grazed. Why isn't the dog here to stand guard over his dead human friends and you, to ward off vultures and ravens and imagined ghosts and winged rodents and mythical parasites and treacherous trash? Worthless excuse for a wolf. No loyalty to his friends. If you cared to teach him a lesson, you would. Rather rest. A yawn pushes out of your mouth. The yawn gurgles into a long mew. The mew meanders into a snow-muffled scream. Your scream is the cry of cats mating in an alley. The cry of a baby abandoned in a ditch. The cry of a banshee. Snow poofs up; you've collapsed. Go to 2 like all those before you, and all those to come.

66.

You are before you, reclining in your rocker, under your loving blanket, cuffs massaging your calves, eyes closed, seeing nothing, perhaps visualizing, perhaps thinking, perhaps dreaming. Perhaps nothing. Conscious, you think, without you. It's hard to know what's happening inside your head because you're outside of it.

Your hair is greasy. You haven't shaved in weeks. You stink. Your aroma is equal parts dying dog, rotting leaves, rotten potatoes, rotgut, wet sheep, pissed-in sheets, tramp insulated by underclothes of moldy newspapers, and the body odor of citizens of hot third world countries deprived of the greatest historical advancement toward peace: deodorant. It's difficult for you to be in the room with you, but at least you didn't go out in public to pursue the scream and exhibit your degenerate condition. You can't imagine how you haven't relieved yourself on yourself in your chair, considering the time you may have been here and the vessels of fluids, some more full and some less, each with a post-it note laid across the top, on the end table. The essences of your scent strongly imply dampness and decomposition. But you have not lost bowel control. Though you must have moved your bowels somewhere, despite your lack of food intake. You are hungry. Scribbling on the post-it note lids, you note the color of the liquids in glasses and mugs and bottles and jars: mountain river clear, post-it yellow, nuclear meltdown orange, river delta brown. Once upon a time, you were considerate and resourceful enough to lay post-it notes over each receptacle as ingenious, permeable lids which could be written on. While disturbing such a lid, noting the tide flat gray of a wine glass's contents, a slurry of crustacean seaweed fish saltwater mud regret rot surges into your nostrils. Your attempt at decorum is nullified by your self-examination, but nevertheless you stop disturbing the lids out of either self-respect or disgust. Through a hole in the

blanket, a patch of pale, sparsely haired skin is visible. You decide that you do not wear pants. Reclining, your belly does not give the impression of rotundity. Toys crunch under your feet. A dinosaur constructed of microscopic Legos, yet tinier Strawberry Shortcake and Raspberry Tart cupcakes, life-size light sabers, a praying Care Bear, a keyboard suddenly bleating an electronic version of some Vivaldi higher and more harpy than the original. You do not care for Vivaldi. You shut it off. The toys, you imagine, lend legitimacy to the children to whom you previously assigned probability. Still, you deduce from the reestablished silence that the probability of their presence now is low, unless there was a nuclear explosion and those are their shadows burned into the walls and shadows count as presence, rather than where they traced each other's bodies with Sharpies.

You snore. A sign of life.

You pull the chain of the brass floor lamp whose neck curls over your chair and whose head hangs above you and whose giant eye stares at you and you are lit incandescently and unforgivingly. Your complexion is sallow and your under-eyes baggy and your beard thin and your skin oily and there is a zit ready to erupt under your nose. The light is bright on your face; the rest of the room is dim.

The backs of your eyelids glow. It takes you a few minutes to open your eyes. Blink the blinding light to 70.

67.

In a city you walk a maze of streets. The visible flare their nostrils and march or scurry on unable to determine the cause of the clomp and stench. There are those who look like you but you don't see them. You hear them rave under their breath. You smell them. The city teems with the destitute, with the invisible. You believe that unlike anyone else you see them because you see yourself in your mind's eye and comprehend your own destitution and therefore can conceptualize and to some callous degree empathize and to a limited extent take upon yourself the unseen destitution of others.

In the city bulbs (daffodils onions bluebells garlic tulips shallots hyacinth) fruit trees (cherry apple plum pear) roses (roses) and vines (clematis wisteria bougainvillea kiwi snap peas nightshade morning glory milkweed grape poison ivy) bloom. Spring in the city is more beautiful than the spring you left in the wilderness, an observation that conflicts with your faith in spring and or wilderness. To your eye no one misses the girl.

The city resembles yours long departed. The detective buried alive in you decides you exited the Labyrinth in a different place than you entered. If not then

in a different time and the city migrated. Or both. You've walked a long way to get home. You cannot say with much confidence that this world is the same you left. It is a little different but you can't say how. It is the same in that you are in it. But there are no significant evident advances in technology or happiness. Some buildings are boarded some rubble some absent some under construction some erected. Some gleaming and bustling. Some empty and derelict. People don't talk to you unless they're crazy but they never did and you are invisible and they talk to themselves. You are shorter than you were. Your neighborhood is dilapidated deserted empty. The clomp of your clogs fills it. You recognize street names stray flowers house numbers. You find yours: 67.

Your house is not yours. Mossy shingles drip over the eaves but the siding has been redone beige vinyl. A small addition has been added to the back. Another bedroom on the second floor? Your office extended and converted to a great room? There never was room to expand to the sides. The chicken coop has been eliminated along with the chickens. Children pour out the front door and flock through the yard. They shout. At least they're outside on a fine day chasing balls or playing baby or house or wedding or riding bikes in the street in the sunshine that warms your naked invisible torso or playing gods and mortals or heroes and villains or bulls and bullfighters as the pollen rises in your nostrils instead of playing roleplaying video games inside. The children are not yours but you see something of yourself in them. Are they your wife's by another man if you had a wife? Are they your children's children if you had children? Your children's children's children? Et cetera? Is this world entirely populated by your progeny? Are they utter strangers? They are unsupervised except by you. They don't see you watching them tell each other what to do fighting over who directs the chaotic play conducts the cacophony exercises authorial control who frees their own imagination and kills or saves or cries or slays or heals or wounds or sires and who is left for dead. Nor do they take exception to the clomp of your clogs. Either their imaginary worlds are bubbles impermeable to your reality or else every possibility every sound is yet possible to them and thus accepted without need for explanation or perhaps the sound of your wooden shoes on the cement is incorporated effortlessly into their world their play their story as the clomp of horse hooves or the stomp of soldier boots or the dorsal clapping of the mighty wings of a mammoth butterfly. You shuffle on your stub knees to your front door not your front door wide open gaping airing out the house on this fine spring day.

The first floor has been remodeled. The house is narrow has always been narrow will always be narrow unless whoever owns the house buys out the neighbors and incorporates their houses into his or hers or theirs. The floor plan

is what it is. The internal walls have been demolished. The first floor is a single long greatroom containing within its depths a kitchen a diningroom table a bathroom veiled by a modesty curtain a paperless desk upon which sits a computer a wraparound couch a large digital screen built into the wall a gaming console a shelf of books and board games totes of toys your old easy chair pushed into the back corner and reupholstered in cardinal red. There are no other indications you lived here or ever existed or exist still. You look for an old manila folder or an old accordion folder or an old three-ring binder overflowing with papers and post-its and scribbles but you find nothing no paper except for drawing pads for the kids and the book relics none of whose words you recognize as yours displayed as works of art on the shelf. You'd go upstairs but you don't know you know who lives here and that is their personal space where they can be their true selves uninhibited by trespassers voyeurs parents authority figures judges psychologists theologians philosophers politicians scientists historical figures and other proclaimers of truth. You in your long life have learned to respect personal space. And or you're sick of climbing out of depths. Of walking. Of continuing. Inside out of the sun you are cold. You don't go upstairs. It's almost your last choice. You hoist yourself into your Lay-Z-Boy and recline. You flip up the footrest though you have no feet. You'd forgotten how comfortable how conforming how sedating how tranquil your chair is. Something persists you assure yourself. Heart-warmed you remove the Cap of Invisibility from your scraggly head liberate your beard from the folded skin of your neck readjust your scarf because your intention is not that of a flasher kick off your wooden clogs and their upturned toes and give your stumps air. Your belly rises and falls ribs jutting breathing deeply. You expiring to 2 as you wait for the children to come in for pizza. It's on the counter, delivered.

They may dig in and take a bite and spread grease on their glistening cheeks before they see you whoever you are mostly naked lowerlegless dilapidated and deserted emaciated and smiling a monster capable of anything dead in the chair. Before they scream. Before they recompose and hypothesize and explain and make up stories about you. Stories you won't hear. Stories about how they momentarily turned to stone at the sight of you or about how you are their monstrous grandfather who put his daughter into a locked toy chest in the full bathtub as a reenactment an experiment to experience what it would feel like to do such a thing or to have such a thing done unto you or about how you've returned from heroic labors to save their great-grandmother from all her suitors all their great-grandfathers but she is already long dead or about how they turned you the spiteful king enslaving and bedding their mother to stone by holding a mirror up to your destitute face and then cut off your lower legs to boot or about

you being the Labyrinth's bull sent out to pasture after innumerable conquests retired from maiden and hero consumption to the easy chair because there are no more heroes and maidens or about how you are a bird come to raise another's young or orphans or young that you've orphaned or about you as a bee that stung and sacrificed itself for the hive or you as a vampire bat vomiting blood this pizza they sup to feed its starving brethren or you as an ant like them working communally and constructively for the queen. They will say that the sight of you first inspired them subconsciously to be an astronaut even though there are no more astronauts to be a fireman a ballerina a superhero a villain a sidekick a henchman an author an accountant a secretary a personal assistant a copy editor a writer of advertisements a policeman a hero a scientist a philosopher a vagrant a troubadour a service industry worker with two part-time jobs a princess Jacques Cousteau Stanley Kubrick Amelia Earhart Martin Luther King, Jr. J.D. Salinger Hendrix David Foster Wallace Dostoyevsky Lincoln Shostakovich Cortázar Red Cloud a cowboy a mule packer a mother or father a social service worker a hedge fund manager a psychiatrist a reconstructive surgeon. They will say what they will say. They will tell stories about you. You won't be able to tell your version of your story. You'll be dead. You won't be able to correct them or set them straight or shed light on your version of the truth of who you are and why you returned. Or your most recent reason your final corruption of actuality your last story about yourself that you won't tell to your possible posterity while they don't listen and incorporate whatever they don't hear into their own history: you've returned out of pride to do what you said you'd do long ago: to make your word good: you will find the scream their scream the scream you inspire though you are not here to hear it:

68.

You taste the air with your tongue. Over-steeped tea. Mice decomposing in the walls, potatoes rotting in the cellar, fallen plums fermenting in piles. A bitch in heat, the milk poop of an infant, a pear orchard in bloom, the dust of a gravel road in late summer.

The air is cold and heavy. As after love. A lover rolling off. Catching breath. The scream is no longer here. You are too late. You knew you were too late when you came here. You are always too late.

There is no point in staying here. You don't care about what caused the scream, who was hurt, who killed, who born, who pleasured, who defiled. You don't think of explanations or evidence or pleadings or why's. You have no notions. You want it. What you cannot hear.

The scream did not flee but dissipated. It doesn't matter in which direction

you pursue it. You walk south in a straight line. If there is a fence in your path you climb over, if a window you open it and climb in, if a door you knock politely and pass through the house if it is opened politely or break it down with a blow of your staff if not, if a patch of light from a street lamp you are lit then unlit, if a car you walk atop, if a tree you climb, if a river you swim, if a wall that you choose to not climb or go under or break with your bare hand or booted feet or staff curved on one end you make use of the tiny subatomic probability that each of your atoms is in and then on the other side of the wall and pass through. If a person you considerately guide them aside with the hooked end of your staff or if not raise your nub of a right hand to itch your socket and stare at them with your one eye until they flee and if not, if they are as if turned to stone in terror, you pass through them. As if they're not there. You tread arbitrarily but decisively southward, cloak billowing northward behind you, not hearing if you leave screams in your wake, though it smells like you do, though none are the one you seek.

You tread the long cold dark night until you smell a burning to your left. The sun rises at 71.

69.

It takes forever. Your perception of your lack of progress is agonizing. Be more painstaking, reduce your unit of measurement, observe your movement in millimeters, in micrometers, in nanometers, eventually hear a faint screaming. Spurring you. You are lonely and hungry and want to complete a task. Over time, the volume of the scream rises. The scream does not pause for breath. The scream incites in you a new kind of claustrophobia, a noise torture, but still you push on into the scream because when your choice is between torture and pain ahead and nothing and emptiness behind, you choose ahead every fucking time because you long for feeling, squeezing, distending, attenuating through this crack to join the scream or cease it or hug it or eat it, but above all to experience it. You who had heard nothing but your own scrape and breath for as long as you could remember are vibrated by the scream at your natural frequency and sing a high tone involuntarily. The oscillating shard of you that's left after all the scraping reverberates into a room almost filled with a hairy Samson or a Greek God or a grotesque giant or the last Titan, Atlas, fat and hairy and sweating and screaming, his arms outstretched pushing against two opposing walls, his head pushing up on the ceiling, his feet pushing down on the ground, his scream pushing out with all he can muster. It is easy for you to believe that he has been here for a very long time. His distraught disposition has not wavered in the short time you've been present. You must be quick. His scream is turning your brain to

jelly. The torch has long been cold, blown out by his fetid scream. But the message on the wall glows. The message is scrawled, not scrawled but engraved in the polished black stone wall, maybe not engraved but etched in what may be Titan blood, which you hypothesize is a strong luminescent acid:

Relieve Atlas of his torture.

What is his torture? Gods it's hard to think with all this screaming. Is he holding up the Labyrinth or trying to break out? You shout but you are a gnat drowning in his scream. You touch him, he's hot, you recoil. Do you kick him in the balls to get his attention, to distract him from the torture of trying to escape when there is no escape, and convince him there is no escape, and thereby decimate his hope and introduce the new torture of futility, nowhere to go, nowhere but here for eternity? Do Titans have balls? Has he been duped into believing he holds up the walls, that if he lets them go they'll collapse on him? Has he been prey to an unreliable narrator? Should you enunciate the soundness of the Labyrinth's construction, shed light on the science in the stones, logic him out of belief in myth? Will he himself then vaporize before you? A more conniving idea: tell him you will assume his burden and hold up the walls and ceiling and floor that need no holding if he will bring you back the eye of the Women of Gray. When he returns, turn him to stone with the head and make for the exit. But would that be cruel, a herculean exploitation, capitalizing on a being who suffers a fate similar to your own? And the Labyrinth might collapse on you. You cannot negate the possibility that the work he does is good and necessary and worthwhile. He must continue his work and be relieved from it. Fine, you'll turn him to stone. All you want is to cease this infernal titanic scream and perhaps that's all Atlas wants too. Project your wants onto him to make this mercy killing easier, to justify your action. Your projected desires and motivations and emotions are all you can ever know of a Titan. Titans are as old and alien to you as horseshoe crabs. You close your eyes and unwind the scarf from the head and hold it by the dreads before him and Atlas's scream echoes away. Your sympathetic high tone quiets. Silence. Your heaving breath. You rewrap the head in its wool and open your eyes. Atlas is a statue of himself supporting the Labyrinth and straining to destroy it. You have completed a task. Your accomplishment is a memory you carry throughout the Labyrinth, relived in diminishing echo. What now? On the wall your everypassage samechoices glow:

If you turn east, writhe forever to 130.

If you turn west, scuttle forever to 137.

If you turn south, wriggle forever to 171.

70.

You look down on you looking up blinded by the light. You don't know why you don't shut your eyes again. Perhaps some part of you wants to be blind. Or else it's an act of defiance, a refusal to submit to yourself, or to whoever is behind the light since you can't see beyond it, a refusal to surrender to the light then. Your defiance or desire for blindness disappoints you. You were prepared to tape your eyes open with the scotch tape on the desk that you use for post-its that don't stick. You were prepared for the scotch tape to not stick. You were prepared to prop open your eyelids with paperclips. After the paperclips bent and failed, you were prepared to find the obsolete diaper pins in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to pin your eyelids open. But now you won't close your eyes against the light. Your eyes water. You inhale sharply.

Tell me what you know about the scream, you demand.

The light demands of you.

What scream?, you exhale. You curtly inhale again, the heat of the light entering your mouth. The sharp intake ends at 74.

71.

You stick around for the red and pink and orange and whatnot blossoming on the horizon in a thin line under the lid of clouds until the colors wash out. You smell water boiling atop the clouds. You find a derelict barn or child's closet or underground parking garage or hollow in the woods before the pot boils dry and the light and stench of burning becomes too much. You brood on the scream, as always unable to imagine its sound. You sleep poorly through the blessedly short winter day in a nest of hay smelling of horse and cow and rat piss, in a pile of dirty clothes scented with grass and recess and spilt milk, in the back seat of an old Buick fragrant with burger wrappers and cigarettes quenched in the dregs of beer cans, under a low shelter of bent pine boughs you wove adeptly with one hand over a depression into which you piled damp leaves redolent of oak and pine and mud. You pull your cowl tight for warmth.

You dream. Of mouths in taught ovals, some horizontal, some vertical, of mouths in perfect circles, of stretched lips demarcating a dark abyss. Of mouths slammed shut. Of the taste of chlorine in a wound, of blood beading on a fingertip, of salt on a slug, of water quivering in a glass, of the sky gone purple. Of the bite. Of the smell of houses and rubber and hair burning. Of friction and skin opened and eyes closed. Of seeing nothing and tasting nothing and smelling nothing and feeling nothing. Of hearing something. Of being asleep and dreaming nothing to 75.

72.

There is nothing for you at 72. A slab of flat under snow you scratch away with your stick. A film of concrete or linoleum or silicon or ice or membrane or graphite two-dimensional. A headless chicken dangling from your hand. Your ear that swapped echoes with the earthen ear aching. A two-dimensional house at the end of your perspective. Your perspective perhaps diminished as a consequence of having only one eye. You look to the west, where you came from. You cannot see the ear or the dollhouse or coop or on and on to your house. Is the ear exactly far enough away that its greatest height scarcely grazes your horizon due to the curvature of the earth? So that your line-of-sight to the ear is tangent to the earth's supposedly spherical surface at a single point (your horizon) between you and the ear? Albeit closer to the ear, since your height is rather greater than its. Although as you step back and reflect on the other dwellings you've investigated (don't step back except metaphorically or you'll screw the calculations) this unique meeting point of your gaze and the earth and the limitlessness of space (still your horizon) moves closer to you (it doesn't move, unless you stepped back) is relatively closer to you in comparison to the distances to the other dwellings, which you decide follow the same rule (the peak of the dollhouse's roof, for example, just touches the line of your gaze tangent to and beyond your horizon ((and beyond the ear)), each subsequent dwelling ((backtracking: ear, dollhouse, coop, pizzeria, etc.)) farther from you but taller ((the distance between the dwellings shrinks and the difference in height diminishes as the distance from you increases, that is as your reflection approaches your old neighborhood)) and set lower in relation to you as the earth curves away in descent past your horizon) because there must be patterns and the patterns must be followed if your life is not to be a bolus. More formless than a bolus, which you give shape to if involuntarily with your mastication and peristalsis and functionality in digestion. A puddle. More formless than a puddle, given shape by its surface tension and cohesion and the contours of the surface onto which it's poured or spilled or rained just as any liquid is given shape by its vessel. An exhalation. Yes, that gets at the expansion and diffusion and dissolution. But yet more formless because a gas is held in an atmosphere by gravity. This is the kind of train of thought that moves you to say there must be patterns, form, design, which is different than intent. The houses follow a pattern. Based on this pattern, and the knowledge of your own height and the distance to your horizon, you should be able to calculate the distance to each dwelling, or its height, or something. An object of equal height to you on the other side of the horizon, such as if there were another you looking back at you, would be the same distance from the horizon as you. You are beginning to

understand. Each dwelling is just out of sight or just within sight; it's the same thing. The distance from the ear to the flat house was immense, from the dollhouse to the ear somewhat less immense; the difference in height between the flat house and the ear is greater than the difference in height between the ear and the dollhouse. Yes, yes, you could calculate exact numbers, heights, distances, and differentiate between as-the-crow-flies and on-the-ground distances, but your feet are sore and my god your ear aches and your brain still smokes from entering and exiting the earthen ear and who gives a shit, why quantify it, would you feel any better if you knew the precise heights and distances? Would numbers console you? Ease your pain? Maybe. Then you need your knowns: your height to your eyes, which you know or can measure, and the radius of the Earth, which you can look up. You won't find the Earth's radius here; go look it up. Assume the Earth is a perfect sphere without topography; use the mean. That's all you need to determine the line-of-sight distance to the horizon, because you and the horizon and the hypothetical center of the Earth form a right triangle, the legs of which are the radius of the Earth to the horizon and the distance from you to the horizon, and the hypotenuse of which is the radius of the Earth plus the height to your eyes. That is you form a right triangle if you neglect the non-uniformity of the curvature of the Earth and the refraction of light in the atmosphere. Use the Pythagorean theorem, if knowing the distance to your horizon assuming the earth as a perfect sphere and neglecting refraction and accepting the term "distance to your horizon" as line-of-sight distance rather than distance along the curvature of the Earth makes you feel better. Calculate, decide, specify, make your possibilities singular. This line of sight distance to your horizon is not so much different than the distance along the curvature of the earth, even if you're on a mountaintop, though not if you're in a satellite. The number will never change, as long as you never change your elevation by say climbing a mountain or lying in the grass and watching the clouds, so it's something to hang your hat on, unless you grow or shrink. Yes or no, would it ease the ache to know this distance to your horizon? Then do it or don't do it accordingly. $a^2+b^2=c^2$. You have the tools. Are you uncomfortable with conflating the distance along the curvature of the Earth to your horizon with the line-of-sight distance, no matter how close the approximation? That's understandable, there is something unauthentic about neglecting the curvature of the Earth when it is because of the Earth's curvature that you have a horizon in the first place. You have the Earth's curve to thank that your horizon is not at an infinite distance. Fine, good, if that's what you decide then use your trigonometric principles to determine the angle, in radians, between the line segments from the center of the Earth to you and the center of the Earth to your

horizon. Call the angle alpha. $\cos(\alpha) = \text{adj/hyp}$. Adjacent being the radius of the Earth. Hypotenuse being the radius of the Earth plus the height to your eyes. You'll have to take the inverse cosine. Use a calculator, really it's fine, no one will think less of you, no one's taken an inverse cosine without a calculator in forever, we don't know how to do it, it'd probably require a book or similar anachronism, don't think of it as a concession, as an incompleteness, as a shortcoming, as a failure when you were going to actually do something right and true from beginning to end, it's just how it is, there's always a level above and a level below and you can't comprehend everything. Multiply alpha, in radians please if math means anything to you, by the radius of the Earth and you will have the distance along the Earth from you to the horizon, easy as pie, neglecting the refraction of light in the atmosphere and irregularities in the Earth's curvature. If this still is not authentic enough for you, if you would feel better taking into account the refraction of light and irregularities in the Earth's curvature, that is doable, there are methods, go do it, by all means, take some initiative if it will ease your suffering, there are geometries beyond the Euclidean, there are maths beyond geometry, beyond calculus, they may not help you here, do some research, figure out how to calculate the precise and true distance to your horizon, both line-of-sight and along the arc of Earth, from your present location under current atmospheric conditions considering topography and that the Earth is not a perfect sphere. Dedicate yourself to something for once. Don't be mired in mediocrity. Your consolation can be achieved with a bit of willpower. Desire. Fortitude. Suffering. Determination. The distance is knowable, calculable, determinable. All that is required is a decision, and action, and a tolerance for pain.

Your ear still hurts because you're not finished. Now that you know the distance to your horizon to your satisfaction (or if you don't, to your lack of satisfaction), you can return to satisfying your desire to know where you've been, to quantify the dwellings which you've investigated in terms of distance from your present location (the two-dimensional house) and height above the Earth's surface, rounded to sea level (you must assume there's no relief here on this white expanse, you must). Will your ear pain cease once you know the solution? You have decided in your gazing that the highest point of each of the dwellings is just in sight and just out of sight beyond the horizon, because that's the pattern, and without form you are either chaos or nothing but ear ache. For example, then, for starters, you gaze at the uppermost out-of-sight tip of the ear auricle, Darwin's tubercle, the vestigial node on the helix exhibited by approximately 10% of the population. But specifics!, you lament, clutching your ear. Implore yourself. Figure it out. The relationship between the earthen ear, or

the dollhouse, or the coop, or the pizzeria, and your horizon is the same as the relationship between you and your horizon, merely on the opposite side. A simple matter of right triangles, geometry, trigonometry. Integration if atmospheric effects soothe you. To determine the distance of the earthen ear from your horizon all you need is the radius of the Earth, a mean approximated value for which you've already looked up, and the height of the ear. You don't have it? Then go measure it. So what if it defeats the point. To know where you are in reference to where you've been, you cannot return to where you've been or where you've been will be where you are and where you are will be where you've been? And your horizon would retreat before you instead of holding its ground? And the ear has already infected you once? Then estimate. Fine, you are too idealistic but fine, then precisely calculate the height of the ear using the radius of the Earth, which some poor schmuck has already estimated for you, and the distance of the earthen ear from your horizon. We know you don't know that either. You must maintain clarity of thought despite your throbbing ear. Surely there is some ratio, you can use, such as your height to your eyes is to the distance to your horizon as the height of the earthen ear (or dollhouse, or coop, etc.) is to the distance from your horizon. Go on now. Ignore the pain. $a/b=c/d$. Or something like it, throw some square roots in, figure, try anything, mentally divide yourself from your ache, do the math, imagine your ear isn't there, do some research, want the answer. You just need to need the solution bad enough. Maybe if you had an instrument, a laser, or a plumb bob and a protractor, or prescription painkillers, don't stop now, take a measurement without leaving where you stand, figure the azimuth, determine an angle, persevere, use the angle, cosine it, tangent it --

Stop. Quit making us the needy ones. It's you who wants to know; we don't give a shit. If you knew the height you could determine the distance to the dwelling and vice versa, but you don't know either and that's not changing unless you make it up so fuck off with your calculations and triangles and arcs. Give up. Assume you are on the opposite side of the Earth from your house (now you can determine the distance to your house along the surface of the Earth and as the crow flies ((as the auger bores)) but it is impossible to know the height of your house ((unless you take it to be infinite)), are you painless, no, anodyne, nevermind, cured, forget it, happy?) and that dwellings cannot get shorter than the perfectly flat, two-dimensional house (don't get into negative space with yourself) you walk away from, earache unalleviated, waxing, onward, eastward.

The burrows and nests and lean-to's and mounds rise slowly. The dwellings are therefore close-packed, if still in looser arrangement than in your neighborhood, which you enter after walking a long time, where the houses are

immeasurably different in height and all other qualities, making the space between them indistinguishable. But you can feel which space is yours, which home, as you approach it from the west, bearing east, ear aflame, yet screamless, having circumscribed the Earth in a straight line with only a few negligible dalliances and arriving where you began without time to rest and recuperate at your house or make an appointment with a Western, antibiotic-prescribing doctor about the ear because you can guarantee all who read your account that there is no scream on that thin straight line and you must proceed to hunt for the scream and eliminate space where it might be. It's the only way to temporarily forget the pain in your ear, doctors and drugs and painkillers be damned, you made a commitment, you gave your word, don't give up.

Ever systematic, you have an insight. The world is round. More precisely, the world is spherical, neglecting the irregularities that make said state an incomplete truth. You will turn a degree, circumambulate the Earth, return to the point you began, turn another degree, and repeat, turning a degree each time you arrive at your house for a pit stop and a point of reference and a resupply of leftover oxycodone and hydrocodone to clear your mind and hush the pain increasing in your ear every circumambulation, degree-by-degree walking the planet until you encounter the scream. No, you just said "painkillers be damned" and before that "all that is required is ... a tolerance for pain." Also, a degree at the equator encompasses approximately 111.3 kilometers. A degree at either pole encompasses 0.0 kilometers. It would be more appropriate if there were more degrees at the equator than at the poles, because the equator is closer to the sun and hotter, but that is not the case. The number of degrees is constant, 360, 2π radians if you prefer, but the amount of space per degree changes significantly. Like to nothing, at the poles. Therefore, if you walk in a straight line on a vector determined by a one degree turn from your house, there will be gaps, increasingly wide near the equator, that you will never inspect, never set foot on, never enter within earshot of, never find or not find the scream within. Your search at the poles, will, on the other hand, be overkill, as you won't be able to help walking where you've previously walked. This method is less than satisfactory. You discard it. You think.

If it's at a pole, the scream is likely to be dead and frozen and well preserved. If it's near the equator, the scream is likely to be either thriving and procreating in life-promoting heat, sun, and moisture or dead of a tropical disease and already decomposed. Does this insight aid you?

Your ear hurts.

Your solution: you will take one step to the right, placing your right foot in foreign territory and your left foot where your right was, and walk east. Your left

foot will always step in your old right's footprint. You will walk half in and half adjacent to the ribbon you previously walked, making a new ribbon of the earth's crust, as if you were peeling an apple. You will step one step to the right each time you reach your house's longitude and begin again, leaving no peel unpeeled, the peel curling behind you as you slice, you a pairing knife under the apple's skin, taking care to not miss any scrap of epithelium under which could hide the scream, compelled after a scream as if drug along by a fishhook set in your lip long ago, the bait bit, lip ache analogous to earache, attached to an invisible, taught line, or like you are stepping ever tangentially to and away from you, the past you always behind you in your tracks just over the horizon, the past you also to the immediate left of you holding your hand, or your foot, double-checking for assurance, carrying the headless chicken at your northernmost aspect, the right half of you where you've never been in unexplored wilds, brandishing a walking stick for protection, the ear, your right ear, throbbing with each step, the pulsing pain an inverse compass pointing due south, always perpendicular to your step-by-step circular progress to 34.

73.

Come to the place where Enenenenenen's dwelling should be. Revert momentarily to a discarded nomenclature due to your own lack of expression. Stare one-eyed and see nothing. The place is nearly flat, empty, snow-crusted. Where there is a slight depression in the whiteness, brush away the snow. Expose a human ear, no larger than an elderly man's large ear, on its side, protruding from the earth. White hairs projecting. Earwax. An unshivering ear. Pinna upward cupped, middle and inner ear below the frozen crust of earth. Is the ear's mechanism below the frost line? An uncomplaining auricle. Accepting whatever sound comes its way without protest. Fleshy. A stoic ear. Lay down the drained chicken and flick the ear. A jiggle, nothing more. Tug on it. Receive no response. Lick your pinky and caress the entryway to the ear canal. Receive not a giggle or slap to the face or a Stop! in reply. Snap, whistle, clap at the ear. Be ignored. Suppose it cannot hear you. The ear is old; it suffers or revels in hearing loss. You are irrelevant, even non-existent, to it. You have only one question for it. Perhaps despite the ear's timely silence and bodily absence and unbroached interiority your scream was loud enough to register. If it would only acknowledge you. Perhaps it has attention deficit disorder. Do what you do to your ADD children if you have them or hard-of-hearing old people if you know them or anyone who will not or cannot or does not listen to you intentionally or unintentionally: speak louder. Cup your hands around the auricular cartilage and scream into the ear, Hello?

Be your scream, a compression wave funneled by the complicated relief of the auricle into the auditory canal. Compress and rarefy the air therein in oscillations of great amplitude and middling frequency. As a wave be energy transferred without transporting the medium (air) through which you travel past hairs and wax, down through a tunnel of smooth skin that would be translucent if light penetrated this deep, which it does if barely, and if it weren't backed by bone after the cartilage, which it is. There's a faint capillary red glow which you cannot see as you're the sound of a screamed salutation beating thunderously on an eardrum. You beat with sufficient force that, as your signal outstrips your physical presence and your consciousness lags, the tympanic membrane and the middle ear bones have already been stiffened by the contraction of the tensor tympani and stapedius muscles in a dampening reflex you forgive, for its functionality is self-defensive, primarily to protect the ear from too energetic of sounds and secondarily to reduce internal background noise such as the sound of your chewing and especially the sound of your voice, rather the earthbound ear's voice since that's the ear you're in, though it does dampen your enthusiasm, your potential for stimulation of the ear, your capacity as a scream for perception, if as a scream you can perceive, which you seem to be able to, and deduction, if as a scream you follow logic, which you must, everything does, and transformation, which you are experiencing right now, transforming from a compression wave in air to a vibration propagated mechanically from the oscillating eardrum to the ossicles, which you know are the smallest named bones in the human body, if you are in a human body, and are yet more ultimate, no, terminal, no, principal, no, primary, no, antecedent, no, ascendant, no, mentionable, yes, nameable, apparently, when considering that each of the three bones is well-known by both its common and scientific names: hammer (malleus), anvil (incus), and stirrup (stapes), thereby doubling the ratio of name to unit volume of these three fine bones. The eardrum bounces in out in out in out in a pattern unique to your salutatory scream, swinging the hammer in your peculiar rhythm, beating the anvil, which thuds against the stirrup, although nomenclature aside these bones are all connected and move something more like a piston, or a wrangler standing in the stirrups at full gallop, bouncing up and down, or some other simile you haven't time for because you are being propagated and reamplified both by mechanical advantage, via the combined lever arm action of the longer malleus arm fulcrumed to the shorter incus arm (with a lever arm factor of 1.3), and a hydraulic pressure increase due to the stapes faceplate where you are transferred to the cochlea being $1/17^{\text{th}}$ the area of the eardrum, where you entered the middle ear (pressure being force divided by area), creating a pressure gain of approximately 22 at the coupling of the stapes faceplate and the oval window

(fenestra ovalis), your portal into the cochlea of the inner ear. Of the labyrinth beyond the cochlea -- the vestibule, its oblique ridge, its pyramid, its aqueduct, the semicircular canals (lateral, posterior, superior) intertwined like Olympic rings, filled with fluid and the ampulla filled with hairs, the utricle and saccule with their otoliths of calcium carbonate crystals and their hair cells (always hair cells, even here in the labyrinth where you aren't, are they atrophied in this earthbound ear where there is neither linear nor rotational motion?), or is this ear sensitive enough to perceive the multiple rotations of our planet?), the organ of balance and dizziness and equilibrium and nausea, defining up and down and distinguishing right and left and grappling with clockwise and counterclockwise and theologizing of horizontal and vertical and tethering perception to the gravitational center of the Earth -- you will never know.

The faceplate of the stapes, moved by your energy, moves the oval window (not glass but a flexible membrane) in out in out in out transmitting you as a vibration into and through the essentially incompressible fluid of the swirling, snail-shell-ish, bi-chambered cochlea, in which you make 2.5 turns around a central axis from the base where you enter to the apex, the climax, the helicotrema of the cochlea, where the membrane dividing the two chambers ends and the chambers unite as one. You are a vibration in the perilymph of the upper chamber (the scala vestibuli, contiguous with the oval window through which you enter the cochlea), and the endolymph in the dividing membrane (the scala media, itself a thin, fluid-filled chamber, the chamber within the chambers, the third chamber, the third scala, the cochlear duct, the sensory organ of the sensory organ, the location of auditory sensation, the membrane or wall or line dividing two spaces, one upper, one lower, or one inner, one outer, or if you prefer, both outer to this inner division, the line an in-between place, the line itself a space, the sensory space, within the two dimensions a third, a fourth, more?), and the perilymph of the lower chamber (scala tympani, to which you are transmitted by the vibrating fluid of the scala vestibuli and the displacement of the scala media, and where you are ultimately dissipated by the deflection in out in out in out of the round window at the scala tympani's base), the chambers, contained within the bone of the cochlea, curling around the cochlea's central axis, the modiulus, which houses the spiral ganglion of the cochlear nerve, which sends an electropotential representation of sound to the brain. If there is a brain.

You are getting ahead of yourself, perhaps because you are no longer a single screamed Hello but a continuum of vibrations, and some of you has lurched past this oscillation in a snail shell, this confined, internally deflected, undulatory, cochlear state of being, to the electrochemical existence beyond, while some of you yet arrives mechanically through the oval window. But you try to exist in the

present moment, and to stretch your conception of the phrase. The oval window pushes in, pushing the fluid of the scala vestibuli, a fluid incompressible, like most liquids, which, having nowhere else to go because of the bony cochlear wall, pushes down on the basilar membrane bordering the scala media or middle chamber or cochlear duct or cochlear partition, and the scala media deflects in response to the pushing, and the other delimiting membrane (Reissner's membrane) of the middle chamber consequently deflects and pushes on the fluid of the scala tympani, which, having nowhere else to go, bulges out the round window. The oval window is pulled out, the membranes of the middle chamber are pulled up, and the round window is pulled in. The oval window pushes and pulls on fluid divided by a flexible membrane and housed in rigid bone, as if in a bowl full, utterly full, of liquid and wearing a swimmers cap, for example, as a lid. Or a balloon. Or plastic wrap. Which has another fluid-filled bowl, also elastically lidded, inverted upon it. The fluids separated by the membranes. The bowls sharing a common, reciprocating face. The bowls would have to be well sealed at their face to make your metaphor viable. The face is pushed and pulled by movement of the fluid in the first bowl. Which must have a window, preferably oval, via which to initiate the movement. The face necessarily pushes and pulls on the fluid within the inverted, mirror image bowl, which necessarily pushes and pulls on the concomitantly mirrored window, preferably round. It's a problem of constraint and freedom of movement.

Within the membrane, the plastic wrap, the face, is the freedom. Think of yourself as an oscillation in the yin-yang symbol if you must. Which handily contains two circles, windows, to introduce and release energy. Within the membrane, the oscillating line between white and black, the expressive face where two separate worlds meet, the flexible mirror between two chambers, is another chamber, another world. A world that, as your vibrations are absorbed, becomes your whole existence. You feel like your existence is repeating itself, reiterating itself, but that's okay, it is, you are a series of vibrations, you repeat this exercise again and again, you have plenty of time to understand. The up down displacement of the membranes is propagated through the length of this coiled shell as a transverse wave like a ripple on a pond, though this ripple is between two ponds meeting face to face, and though this conception will be complicated later.

You repeat to clarify yourself, and if not clarify at least reinforce through repetition: you are a pressure wave passing through an essentially incompressible fluid, which means you're less of a pressure wave than a vibration, since there's essentially no compression (you note you're being converted from outer ear compression wave to inner ear transverse wave with an

intermediate, mechanical transition state, though all your states are transitions). The middle chamber and its membranes are deflected upward during rarefaction, downward during compression, or vice versa, up and down are only a matter of relative orientation. Due to the fluid's incompressibility, the change in acoustic pressure in the cochlear perilymph (you) is almost instantly transmitted throughout the cochlea, the round window releasing cochlear fluid pressure created by stapes displacement of the oval window, thereby permitting cochlear fluid motion, thereby causing movement of the scala media. Fluid motion in the scala vestibuli and scala tympani, synchronous with stapes vibration, displaces the scala media and, most relevant for your continued sensation and therefore perception and thus consciousness as a screamed salutation, the Organ of Corti and its basilar membrane, which divides the scalas media and tympani. The transverse wave of you travels along the basilar membrane, conveying stimulus energy toward the apex at less than $1/100^{\text{th}}$ of the speed of sound in air, travelling ever slower (do you not feel sluggish in this snail shell, overburdened with your housing, bloated or lugubrious or weighed down by all the you in a single screamed word?) as the basilar membrane gains elasticity as you proceed along it and more of your energy is manifested in amplitude than velocity (perhaps you feel languid, like an overworked rubberband giving more each time you self-conceive?). Nevermind the conflict of instantaneity and time lag.

The truth is, or another truth is, the frequencies of your waves don't so much propagate along the membrane as fly by it, barely displacing it, a vibration in the perilymph, until it reaches its point of resonance, where it displaces the membrane a lot. The basilar membrane consists of fibers short and stiff near the oval window and long and limber near the apex. Or, the basilar membrane is wider near the apex than near the oval window. The narrower/stiffer the membrane, the less inertia it has to oppose changes in motion and the more readily it responds to rapid changes in fluid movement. Fluid movement changes occur rapidly with high frequency stimuli. Closer to the apex, where the membrane is elastic and dominated by inertia, it responds more enthusiastically to the slower changes in movement of low frequency sounds. And so you achieve resonance -- your largest amplitude -- near the cochlea's base if you are a high frequency and closer to the apex if you are a low frequency. You reinforce that your screamed hello is not a single sung musical note, which however pure and perhaps evocative is meaningless without the context of other frequencies, but an entire song (you positively reinforce) consisting of many layered frequencies (is it?), high, low, and in-between.

You don't understand what's happening to you. Okay. You ask yourself, When you play the xylophone, which bar emits the lower note (lower

frequency), a long or short bar? The frequency of the xylophonic note is the struck bar's natural frequency. Which is to say, if a vibration such as a sound wave, a compression wave, you as a vibration in the perilymph, a compression wave passing through an incompressible fluid, if the xylophone were immersed in the fluid, if the xylophone were inside the ear and you were to pass over a bar whose natural frequency was the very frequency of your vibration, that bar of the xylophone would vibrate largely, sympathetically, with great amplitude, excited mightily. It would resonate, ring, peal, cry out, exciting itself further. And so it is with all your diverse, dissident, disassembled frequencies traveling one-by-one, alone in togetherness now, segregated in series, vibrating or compressing or both through a fluid, slightly displacing a membrane until one mighty glorious moment when you displace it significantly and in that climactic moment are absorbed and dead and gone, or one piece of you, and another and another and another, others of you yet journeying along the membrane whose hairs lengthen as you go, a membrane you are desperate to arouse, a membrane which widens even as the diameter of the cochlear aperture through which you travel and in which you are housed narrows, coiling around and around yourself, upward, a spiral staircase, or sideward or downward (relative and irrelevant), with much more rotational motion than linear progress along the axis, until each of yourselves reach their places of resonance. Or else arrive at the apex, failed, dissipated, done, frequencies outside of the ear's range of hearing absorbed without ever knowing the ecstatic sensation.

To continue, for the length of your Hello, you (all of the yous) are continually arriving, vibrating, rippling, resonating, displacing, damping, dying along the basilar membrane supporting the Organ of Corti in the middle chamber or cochlear duct or scala tympani. The membrane doesn't respond much until one of you reaches the place whose properties (mass, elasticity, width) define a natural frequency resonant with your own (you repeat, reinforcing a neural pathway) (you're in the middle of you now, approximately halfway through Hello, a certain frequency in the first L, there's been much vibration and oscillation and resonance before you by you and there will be much after you by the remainder of you, if on a generally lower O note -- as long you did not scream Hello! with false or sincere excitement or an interrogative inflection revealing your self-doubt and lack of confidence -- a low O stimulation that will continue in discreet continuous repeated packets of excitation in the neighborhood of the cochlear apex for as long as you hold the tail of your screamed Hellooo), higher near the oval portal, lower near the apex, vibrating wildly at the natural location of resonance, exciting a unique asymmetric peak with each of your component frequencies, locally displacing with abandon the

basilar membrane and the hairs (always everywhere hairs) of the Organ of Corti, 4 hairs deep, 1 inner and 3 outer per row, rank and file like a phalanx of ants lined up on their hind legs on a long reed-woven raft riding both ripples and the spikes of momentary tempest, the ants marching in place, going nowhere but up down, swaying, bending forward and back, keeping their feet. Perhaps anemones would be a better analogy than ants. Short supple hairs on the rippling membrane immersed in endolymph. Calling them hairs is an analogy. They are more properly and less descriptively (unless you're into ancient languages, which you are, you are at this moment a pre-language, a scream barely decipherable as a Hello, a guttural sound at the leading edge of communication) named stereocilia (or unless you remember what a stereo is and what cilia are from high school biology and can independently reapply that knowledge). At your frequency's location of resonance the membrane deflection is great, the wave is mighty, the stereocilia deflection is sufficient, the hair bending stimulates: the bending of the inner hairs opens mechanically-gated ion channels, allowing potassium ions to enter the cell from high concentrations in the endolymph. The influx of positively charged potassium ions (K^+) depolarizes the inner hair cells. The change of electric potential within the inner hair cells opens voltage-gated calcium channels near the cell base; calcium ions (Ca^{+2}) enter, triggering the release of glutamate neurotransmitter via vesicle exocytosis into the synaptic cleft between the basilar end of the inner hair cells and the afferent terminals of the auditory nerve, the receptors of the spiral ganglion neurons, you don't know how to say it right, what's happening to you, you're changing so fast, your mechanical manifestations converted to action potential in the auditory nerve worming down into the Earth, you stripped of physical tangibility, materiality, you an electrical impulse, no, less material than electricity, an action potential transmitted to the brain or processing center or black box or dead end or whatever this ear is attached to, to be interpreted for pitch and volume and yaw and meaning, or not, to be filed in a drawer, or nothing, to be fired into the void or fed into hot magma, does it matter?, it's not you, you are left behind, you are a physical being and your action potential is not, you are here and your scream, your hello, is gone, you were a communication but at some point (this point?) your communication becomes another's, you are heard or not heard but you are not the hearing, you are yourself not the ear's chemical or electrical messages about you, you were a salutatory scream and now you are a soundless disembodied nothing, an oceanic vibration dying in a curling exitless conch shell, more and more of your vibrations arriving and dying, an oscillation asphyxiating in a fluid, an excitation dampened by hairs, a wave bulging at a round window, energy spent after your peak, you dissipating to nothing over and

over and over as each of your frequencies pass for as long as your screamed Hello lasts.

(You may want to repeatedly visit 2 until you can endure no more dying. Then stay there.)

You are motionless, absorbed, silent.

(Or, if you choose to not leave yourself behind, if your existence is not yet so mind-numbingly, intricately, transcendently beyond comprehension as to befuddle and infuriate and desolate you and induce you to scream and be indicatory of not solely how the ear, your buried ear, an ear detached or unattached or attached to you-know-not-what functions as an ear but also how it functions as a stunning metaphor for life, no, beyond metaphor, a staggering irony, no, beyond irony, the perfect description, no, beyond indescribable, how it functions as conveyance both meaningful and meaningless, or it has nothing to do with the ear -- if you clutch to your screamed Hello, to yourself, with such abject desperation that you will not be ripped from you until there is 100.0000% ((you're not afraid to append more significant zeroes)) no you, material or immaterial, left to clutch, then hold to 182.)

(To reinforce, you invested approximately all of yourself, emotionally and spiritually and physically, into your attempt to communicate with the ear, and now you're dead. Visit 2 again to remind yourself. Stay there until you fully understand the permanence of your death.)

You rise from the dead.

No, you rephrase. Self-conscious of the socially unacceptable and emotionally revealing volume of your Hello, which received no response, the insignificant quantity of you that you unconsciously and self-protectively withheld from your greeting weakly or desperately or discreetly or pathetically screams a whisper on the heels of your screamed, deceased Hello, another despondent Hello but barely audible even to yourself, echoing yourself, and you (the last of you this time, or the last of you you know about) pass again into the ear but with less tumult at the drum, a gentler violence of the hammer, a softer ringing of the anvil, an encouraging touch of the stirrup, a deft tap on the oval window. Your vibrations swirl in the cochlear shell like waste in a toilet bowl, like a conch shell grown by a great sea snail, like post-it notes accreting around a text-scrawled piece of paper within the confines of which you thought you could understand what happens to you inside the earthbound ear, but to which you addend to no end, in search of further clarification and a deeper understanding, wielding the force of repetition, swirling around and around and around the page praying you achieve comprehension or expression or resonance with another before you reach the apex and run out of space and must again coil around

yourself in another layer. But despite the 22x mechanical amplification you receive as the middle ear transforms you, you, the faint repetition of you, are too quiet to displace the basilar membrane enough to depolarize a cochlear nerve. This time (the last time) you (the last of you) go quiet (motionless or static or inert) in the drag of membrane and fluid and hair (absorbed) without achieving resonance (unheard (2)).

Except ... is that an echo? Is it a response? An action not yours? A reaction to you? Yes, before the vibrations of your voice die, you receive a response from the -- no, not the brain or neural control center or supercomputer or hive mind or eternal consciousness or nothing or center of the earth at the other end of the auditory nerve. The response is too fast, too automatic. The feedback is presynaptic, non-neural, thoughtless, reflexive, mechanical, automated, but a response nonetheless. The brain or motherboard or all-knowingness has no say in it. It's the ear's own primordial response that precedes inner hair stimulation, and therefore precedes your resonance and the possibility of you being heard. The response precedes you. The response arrives on the basilar membrane simultaneous to you, but from the opposite direction. The response is not a response to your dubious content, which makes you feel undesired as an individual. The response is to your dwindling existence, which makes you feel desired as a being.

The ear's response is not aural but physical. It engages and encourages and magnifies you. The response amplifies you by a mechanism that was always there but that you were not attenuated, quiet, still, self-reflective, self-conscious, desperate enough to discern. With so little of you left to get in the way, you can perceive the functioning of the cochlear amplifier. The functionality of the cochlear amplifier says that your ear, the earthen ear you're in, lives, that its cochlea lives, if automatic feedback is a sign of life (and if it's not there's much less life around than you thought), though it says nothing about the connection to a hypothetical brain or intuited mind or supposed higher (lower) being or consciousness. The ear is therefore neither attached to a buried cadaver or dismembered/extracted from a live or dead person, unless the ear is kept alive by means such as life support or magical realism. In realistic cadavers, whose cochlea have poor imaging qualities, you stimulate much too much of the Organ of Corti's length (if you are loud enough); your peak extends for one-third of the basilar membrane; the cadaver hears a wall of undifferentiated sound. But due to the cochlear amplifier, you will be heard sharply, down to 4-octave precision, if there is anyone or anything to hear you, unlike if the ear were dead. The automatic response of the cochlear amplifier, then, not only amplifies you but specifies you. It makes your ambiguity precise where without it you mumble and

fail to enunciate. The problem with you, you realize, is you suffer from viscous damping, from shearing drag, from the frictional impedance of passing through a fluid so (does laminar flow dominate the movement of basilar membrane against perilymph, or is there enough shear between fluid and membrane to induce turbulence, oh you don't know and it hardly matters, no matter the nature of your boundary flow ((these parenthetical microscopic inquisitions are the kind of idly rippling thoughts that will become irrelevant when faced with the shear cliff face of your amplified peak, your wall of induced resonance, the rocky precision of response the ear is carving from your amorphous undulations along the Organ of Corti as you speak or ramble or word inadvertently on and on:

The automatic feedback loop of the cochlear amplifier generates movement of the outer hairs near the inner hairs you ineffectually stimulate. The outer hairs move via the prestin protein motor. The protein motor is activated by the depolarization of hair cells at your frequencies' resonant locations on the membrane. This mechanical response to electrical stimulus is called somatic electromotility. The outer hairs oscillate at your frequency. The Organ of Corti is displaced more at more specific locations. The inner hairs are bent more, or more are bent. You are mechanically amplified. The ear's frequency selectivity is improved, making speech and music and your screamed whisper possible. The auditory nerve is stimulated again, as before, if gentler. Though amplified, you are still quiet. Nevertheless you are heard if there is anyone or anything to hear you. You are processed and absorbed and go to 2 and die again.

In a way your content doesn't matter; the ear is not responding to you; it responds to itself, to its own stimulation. In a way your content does matter; your frequencies determine the location of the electromotile response. The ear automatically resonates its membrane in response to you faster than either of you can think.)) there's no time to think.) there's no energy to think on your limitations or the ear's physical obstacles or aids as you (harried) strive to perpetuate your motion despite inertia, absorbed in expending all your energy pushing that possibly deaf ear's bloody basilar membrane up and down (it's hard work) especially the Organ of Corti laminated to the membrane's surface (a labor of love) especially those inner hair cells and their stereocilia sprouting from the Corti's surface whose stimulation is your ostensible end goal of hypothetical communication and who drink your work input (your energy) like parched desert sands or a synthetic sponge or a possible partner who hasn't chosen you. But more than the damping of the hair and the inertia of the basilar membrane and the not-always-responsive Organ lying supine upon it within fluid-filled chambers, your losses can be attributed to yet another membrane, the tectorial membrane, connected to the motile outer hair cells, though not the

sensory inner. A thin layer of fluid is trapped between it and the Organ of Corti. The two membranes are walls sliding in opposite directions over one another, a thin layer of endolymph between. If you were to imagine yourself a point swimming upward through the interstitial fluid from the surface of the Organ of Corti towards the tectorial membrane, you would not be able to imagine reaching a place of still waters, a calm quiet channel far from shore, free from the shearing drag forces of both membranes. You would imagine, at the meeting of the boundary currents, swirl and chop and tumult. You would imagine the endolymph has the same fluid, if not electrical or chemical, properties as water. You would imagine the spray and boom and turbulence as the current, reversing direction incessantly, crashes into, storms against, and ultimately sways these hairs, which if you are a point are huge, cypress trees in a swamp in a hurricane, bridge pylons where a storm surge advances into a flooding muddy river, oil derricks with negligent safety measures tethered to the bed of a heaving, wind-whipped gulf.

You would imagine, but there is a lot of drag, a lot of damping, a lot of shearing, a lot of loss. A lot of unimaginable entropy. Most of the you imparted in your plea is gone lost dissipated absorbed by the time each of your cute compartmentalized frequencies (have you mentioned that the whole continuum of you has been diced as if put through some mathematical transformation into multitudes of little yous?) reaches its destination. The work you put into your screamed whisper, the energy with which you crafted your cry, the you you yodeled is almost all used up. Some of you is already silent, some of you are already quiescent, while some of you trudge(s) on, pushing experiencing vibrating. But as time passes, proportionally speaking, more of you is silent than not. Words on deaf ears. And you're okay with that. A byproduct of consciousness. You make your peace. You don't need to be understood, much less to understand. You dwindle, approaching nothingness. But then this neighbor ear helps you out, a neighbor lending you sugar, an egg, a beer, returning your leaf blower to you in snowy midwinter, offering to tend the chickens, the children, while you're at work, while you're on your quest. You don't want to go to work; you want your children if you have them as excuses; you don't want to bake or own a leaf blower. It offers before it realizes what it is saying, before it has time to wish it thought before speaking. It offers to hear you without knowing what you said. It offers to augment your voice after you've made your peace with not being heard, with not communicating, with dwindling to nothing. Having relinquished your striving, you don't want it returned. But you don't have a choice, and neither does the ear. It reflexively applies the cochlear amplifier, a feedback loop, a sympathetic response, via an

electrochemical muse you are too tired and on your last breath and sloughed off the desire to comprehend to give voice to, activating the protein motor prestin in the electromotile outer hair cells. The stereocilia of those outer hair cells move. Their motion opposes the viscous drag and shearing forces, buoying you, working hand-in-hand with your screamed whisper, dragging you, a drowning voiceless child, from the depths, those hairs are arms, thousands and thousands of arms swimming, or legs pumping a swing, up and up, back and forth, thrilled, excited, chortling, screaming, resonating to a peak, a speak, bending the aloof inner hair cells significantly, activating neurotransmitter exegesis to the spiral ganglion, then down the electron cascade along the auditory portion of the 8th cranial nerve, an action potential to wherever whomever whyever --

You fall precipitously from the peak. You flatline, another sound gone. Each of your frequencies dies almost simultaneously. You can't stop time. Perhaps you can slow it, but only so much. You are dead. You are at 2. You are. No, you are dead, nonexistent, don't doubt it. But the responsive stereocilia of the excited outer hair cells. They are now at rest. But they weren't. They swayed for you. They vibrated, compressing and rarefacting an incompressible fluid. The sympathetic oscillation of the outer hair cells vibrates the fluid of the subtectorial space of the scala media. The vibration travels in reverse through the basilar membrane, transforming momentarily into a transverse wave, incrementally displacing the perilymph of the scala tympani and scala vestibuli on its way back to the base of the cochlea, almost imperceptibly deflecting the oval window, pushing and pulling on the stapes-incus-malleus, the hammer tapping the backside of the eardrum ever so lightly. The eardrum produces a compression wave, a sound, a pip as if from a Who. Is someone in there? You've overfilled the ear with your meager communications like you have these pages with your meager understanding of the ear's functioning if not its implications for the scream, which is long gone, converted into electrochemical messages and firing neurons and learned, reinforced, repeated, strengthened neural pathways that are the physical basis of memory and thought in the brain or silicon chip or hot dense core of the Earth (let alone all who heard it) hours or days or years ago, if not unstored (that the ear responded does not mean it heard), unremembered, unrepeated, forgotten, or if not, changed by the recipient, a malleable memory, a scream remembered that never was. You rephrase, remembering what's happening: the ear burps a little mouthful of sound in reply from the labyrinth-ensconced cochlea into the middle ear (is there spillover into the Eustachian tube, a drip into the back of the throat, if this ear has a throat and perhaps consequentially a mouth, and the Eustachian tube doesn't terminate in another dead end of void or dirt?) and out the ear canal into your ear, which is and has

been pressed expectantly to the earthbound ear, like a couple kissing when one of them barfs a little into the other's mouth. Is this echo you? Do you live? It's an otoacoustic emission, a sound generated by the ear, and so not you, but in response to you, so soft you cannot hear it, the same word, Hello, a whisper of a whisper whispered back at you, an automation or a reflex or a reflection (will the ear pick up your ear's otoacoustic emission resonating in response to the ear's otoacoustic emission and then otoacoustically emit back to you in an infinite series of vanishing reflections?) or pure sound divested of self-consciousness, of body, of intent, of language, of meaning, an inaudible sympathetic automatic scream. As if from a sentient being, but not. It is your voice, you, soft-tossed back at you. It is as much you as the ear, as much neither. You lie on your stomach, one eye permanently closed, freezing, your ear pressed auricle to auricle with the earthen ear, forming a closed passage, a closed system in which your soundless scream reflects back and forth, lessening at each replication. Ear to ear in the snow for as long as you can stomach before you tremble to 72, you listen to you silently echo.

74.

You punch yourself in the ear. You grunt. A grunt is not a scream. You may have needed to sneeze before the blow, but if you did the sneeze is dispelled in the grunt. Nevertheless you stare into the light. The light is mesmerizing, the burn of it on your retina. Your left ear hurts. As does your right hand, your knuckles, your unaccustomed fist.

Not that scream, you grunt.

Which?, you inquire of the light of 77.

75.

You open your eyes and all those you have tread on in your single-minded ambition press in on you out of the nothing you cannot see, taste, smell, or feel. You can hear the pressing, a pressure rising in your ears, collapsing on you. You hear air pushed away as they push in. You hear their open mouths pointed at you, air rushing into their cavities, compression gushing out. You hear barks, demands, quaverings, accusations, ululations. You hear vocal chords vibrating like guitar strings, like power lines humming in the wind, like the quaking earth. Like sunsets and sunrises, like blue sky and cloud, like the gibbous and crescent and full and new moon, like the planet's spin and the galaxy's spin and the universe's spin. You hear their vocal chords conceive and birth a short-lived oscillation in pressure. You hear their chords red, yellow, purple. Black. White. You hear them everywhere, all around you, pressing into you, vibrating,

humming, invading you. You hear their vocal chords vibrate as if your ear were in your hand and your hand at their neck. You hear them at once punch you in your deaf ear with the collective mighty fist of their sound pressure. You hear them silenced. You open your eye and hear nothing in 78.

76.

The path tends westward, you gather. You are sideways shuffling leftward as the sun rises over your right shoulder and later sets over your left shoulder, your long shadow stretching northward before you on the smooth snow, a second you flat in the flats, distended over swells, sunken in depressions, uneven over bumpiness, traveling with the first you, the invisible you, the second you a silhouetted you from the waist up or nipple line up or neck up or nothing, a companion attached at the waist or nipple line or neck or nowhere depending on the depth of the snow through which your passage cuts and the height of the mountains or trees to your south and the time of the day and the low arc of the winter sun. There is also no shadow you if it is cloudy. When there is no shadow you to substantiate invisible you you experience self-doubt. Also loneliness. It is cloudy with increasing frequency. Your shadow's abandonment and your lack of certainty in your existence weary you. Climbing over a mountain pass, your leading left leg strengthens and tires and your trailing right leg weakens and tires. The snow deepens. You cannot see the foreboding or inspirational or quiet or howling peaks or the snow-buried evergreens. Fortunately someone has broken trail before you, a narrow trail that forces you to proceed as they proceeded. Sideways. They. Have their been others? The snow, perhaps melted by the passage of bodies and refrozen, is ice hard and slick on the internal surfaces of the path or crevasse or fissure. The snow insulates you. Your head projects into the bitter air, but it is insulated by the woolen Cap of Invisibility. You escaped the narrow passage of the Labyrinth for a narrow passage of snow. Are others near but invisible to you in their woolen Caps of Invisibility? Do you see their shadows? Your beard reaches to your groin and is frozen to your chest and belly, restricting your head to a northward vision of a wall of white inches away. Your feet are blocks of ice that will have to be amputated when they thaw. You cross a pass through a crevice. You doubt you could get any older.

At first imperceptibly and then covertly and finally manifestly the ground slopes down and your knees ache as day-by-day you pound downhill. The snow wall shrinks. Your brittle beard breaks from your face when you turn your head to look ahead. The crevice passage deescalates to tracks in the snow. Fresh footprints in the slurry. Snowmelt drips in globs from trees. Your feet begin to thaw in a dark wood. The beard on your chest thaws but before it falls you wrap

it around your neck for a scarf. On the last of your foot ice, you skate down an incline and land in the mud on a flat in spring.

One more spring, you think. Can you endure another spring? Another spring of sap rising, flowers blooming, blood coursing? Another thaw another hot sun another invigorating breeze another birdsong another season of hope and promise and rain and mud? Cold mud drips from you. A woman is perched clean and dry on a large rock. She whistles. She is by necessity beautiful, though of more an everyday beauty than a fairytale beauty. A rumpled real beauty rather than an idealized imagined beauty. An imperfect and therefore possible beauty. She's right in front of you. A beauty you could wed if you weren't so aged. That's the bush you're beating around. She isn't beautiful for every instant of everyday, but who can coexist with uncompromising beauty? She's half homely, to her distinction. She carves, whittles?, yes, not whistles a shoe from a block of wood. She knows how to use her hands. She does not see you.

You doff your cap. She screams. You replace it. She peers frantically into the wood like a flightless bird.

-- Don't eat me.

How long has it been since another person, let alone a sturdy young woman, spoke to you? A caw grating your eardrum. Grit deposited in your mouth. Long enough that when you step back and look at her words worming into your head, you are unsure how to form her speech in writing. Does her mouth smoke after the cackle? Is her tongue a grinding wheel? Is her voice an instrument of torture? Your longing abrades you.

-- I am well past eating anything, you croak, let alone a woman as dexterous and big-boned as yourself.

-- Will you wed me then?

She is of stout mind. She perceived your possible desire. And how her hands whittle. This could be your final spring, your last joy ride, your last mud wrestle, your last king of the hill, slap and tickle, manhandling. Your last chance to smell the orchids, blow the dandelions, taste the glacier lily. To put stamen to stigma. Your swansong, your siren call, your fat lady singing.

-- I'm a little mature for marriage.

-- Mature?

-- Experienced.

-- Old?

You cough.

-- I'm not ageist, she twitters. But you are ugly. You were terrifyingly hideous in my albeit short-lived glimpse of you. I'd have to wash you thoroughly, fatten you, get you properly dressed and shod before we could consummate or

conceive a relationship.

-- I think it best for your pleasure and my self-esteem and the overall possibility of success – it's been quite some time – if I remain invisible –

-- You'd also have to slay the monster first.

-- If I am married she is either dead or may as well be. We haven't spoken in ages if we ever did. And if she was my wife perhaps there was a time when she wasn't a monster.

-- The town perched me here as the annual spring sacrifice to the monster in order to promote commerce commencing uninhibited come spring.

-- There are an abundance of monsters. Which?

-- No one has ever seen it, or seen it and lived to tell. The city makes a premium payment of a sturdy young maiden on this rock at the end of every winter. Every spring it stops snowing and the citizens decadently patriotically orgiastically spend their money all summer and the young maiden is never seen again. I hope for something like a Hydra. Some kind of serpent with many heads that consumes a lot.

-- I used to have another head.

-- Is that an indirect proposition of bizarre and explicit sex acts?

Will your last adventure, your final denouement, your ultimate climax end in dirty jokes, in unconsummated innuendo, in economic satire, in anti-climax?

-- I don't know, you answer, but without the other head, and without the walking stick sword I lost so long ago, I am weaponless and hence incapable of killing.

-- I don't believe you. I can't see you and I'm defenseless except for a dull knife and wooden shoes and strong hands. You could kill me.

There is no one around. There are ferns, fern fronds, new mushrooms, tall conifers, a sea of mud. An enraged screeching squirrel. There is no other sound but her breathing, and yours, and the squelch of your shifting weight in the mud that squishes around your unfeeling invisible feet, and the snowmelt babbling, the spring runoff pattering, the trees dripping, water panting from the saturated air as from a hung bed sheet sodden from a neverending night, the ground popping with the impact of each drop, gas burbling from the earth, the ground moaning, the ground shifting under your weight, sucking. A bird mutters. The thaw is thunderous. A deluge so loud you can't think. Permeated. Spring. Wet. No flowers. No sun. No babies. No sex in a riot of color in a patch of sun while bluebirds flit in delight. Mud. Dampness. Dark woods. What light reaches you navigates a sieve of hemlock needles. Moist migrating, hovering slightly above freezing. A woman young and firm and somewhat fetching and perhaps interested in sex, or does she mean marriage, you're not sure, but not without you

meeting certain demands. A woman edible but not defenseless. She is capable. What monster would bother to wake from hibernation or hike up this mountain into this wretched spring? Better to wait for summer, when the sky stops leaking, when it is insufferably hot. No monster is coming.

You look down at your black feet. You can't see them not only because you wear the Cap of Invisibility but also because you are up to your knees in mud and slowly sinking. The pain from their rot fades mid-shin. You tremble in the cold, sending ripples through the mud. She can't see you, but she's no idiot. There are signs of your velocity and location. You are splattered in mud and you ripple the mud and you breathe mud. You're sunken with hunger and wear a scarf as underwear and a beard as a scarf and nothing else but a craven stamina. You experience *déjà vu*. It passes. At the base of the slope, in the last bit of snow, above the receding snowline, behind you, is your last footprint. Your last footprint in the snow. It astonishes you with its size. It is immense. If there were other feet to leave footprints, you wouldn't think it was yours. The footprint grows as the snow melts. The footprint is much bigger than your foot, much bigger than any human foot, so big you don't want to imagine what's attached to the foot that made it though you know it had to be you, a foot that must be even bigger than your carbon footprint (trapped in the Labyrinth so long, off the grid, producing nothing, consuming nothing, your emissions contained, your needs denied, your desires unrealized, if you did nothing positive there, where is the scream, you did next to nothing negative, you calculate a neutral effect on life, but your carbon footprint was so large in your other life and what have you done to reduce its size), a foot that grows as the footprint grows, a monster that grows as the Earth warms.

You reassure yourself that soon the footprint will grow so large that it will cease to exist. The snow is melting and the footprint will no longer be a footprint. The foot will be gone. The monster will be no more. There is no monster come for her but you. She saunters to the edge of the rock, close to you, as if to taunt you. She sits without crossing her legs and whittles her shoes and whistles.

-- I'll wait, you imagine her thinking, he is the one short on time.

Yes, you will die soon, you can only hope. And if so, you are all the more free to do what you wish. To be such a man, outrageous, to do, to experience, to taste, to commit, to hold her meat in your mouth. To live is sweet though one perishes. Because one perishes. How one perishes. You are nearly out of choices, if you're not already, you think, and therefore life, and there is no clear path to victory and what would victory look like. She whistles and whittles and waits and you want to live.

You leap from the mud onto the rock driving your shoulder into her soft chest and she drops an elbow on the back of your head, your invisibility being of less use at close range, and grabs your long hair and yanks to expose your neck but your hair pulls loose from your head and you grab her arm and bite her wrist and she drops the knife and you grab it and jump to the other side of the rock while she flails for you. You amputate your black lower legs at the knee with the dull knife. As you complete the severing, first one lower leg then the other plops into sight on the rock. She screams at each, the first a scream of forlorn terror, the second a scream of imploring support.

-- Kill him, she cries. Dismember him!

She cheers on the battle that is invisible to her. You leave your lower legs and crawl across the rock to her. She cowers as the trail of blood and mud approaches. You take her hair and pull her head back as she tried to do to you. Her neck is strong and soft and fresh and thrumming. She punches you in the stomach and you lose your breath. You kiss her hard on the mouth, breathe her breath, stick your tongue as far in as it will reach, probing, fondling her uvula with your tongue tip. She shudders and melts in the monstrous embrace. You vacate her mouth. You lay her down and stick your stub legs in her wooden shoes and clomp off the rock and squelch through the mud. Your shoemarks close behind you. The mud swallows your trail of blood.

-- Wait! You've slain him. You saved me! I'll be your faithful wife. Come back! Where am I supposed to go? I can't go back there. They gave me a task I can't complete. My job is to sacrifice myself to invigorate the economy. Don't Dido me on this rock. You don't have to steal my shoes, I'll give you everything, I give you me. Where are you? If you leave me here I'll die and you'll have killed me.

She weeps. You cross a swollen raging creek and hear her no more. Where you go, like where you've gone, you go alone. You descend to 67 and what will be your last chance to find the scream before you go to 2.

77.

When you slap your right ear with your open left hand thunder claps in your head. An i.e.d. detonates in your ear canal. A bouncing betty bounces on your eardrum. Your right ear, clutched in your right hand, throbs. Your left hand, clutched with your right hand, stings. The pressure wave compresses and rarifies through your brain and exits your mouth, you think. You hear nothing.

Not that scream, you say but don't hear.

After a minute, the hand-shaped throb specifies into points of pain, which as a whole are yet shaped like a pointillist hand, needles pricking or stingers stinging

or microscopic bombs bursting in rapid and perhaps harmonic succession, in hand-shaped waves, in and on and around your right ear. You shake out and then massage your hand, surprised your ear was able to inflict such pain upon it, but you maintain your composure. After another minute, the pointillist pain washes into an amorphous dull ache. A red handprint blooms on the side of your head. You hear ringing. A light shines in your face. You see yourself speaking in silhouette.

What about this scream don't you understand?

The ringing in your ear is your only response to a question you don't understand. The light is bright and your eyes water and the ring rings through 80.

78.

Pain in your ear, an itch of wax buildup, a lover licking the lobe, a friend sticking his wet pinky in your ear, a punch taken. You respond through your mouth. You spew a sound hard and metallic and hot, red and white and red and white and red and white like sirens, loud and flashing and sharp. The sound you forge cuts the inside of your throat. Gears grinding, high vibration, mechanical seizure. You wake. Eye open, dusk fallen, your hand and your nub at your throat, egging on your sound. You cut it off. Someone's head hangs over you, mouthing words of sympathy in the gray of 81.

79.

Snows six inches in the time it takes you to make the next east neighbor. Chicken dripping a red trail like breadcrumbs. Walking stick leaving footprints like a third leg. Crystals of breath adorning your bedraggled beard. Don't feel the cold's bite. Empty unhungry belly. Scream somewhere. Chicken integral but you don't know how. To the truth of it. The truth you mumble. The truth you perambulate. The truth you peel, onion-like, to get to the truth. More onion. You dissect. Detective. Water sheared from eyes, winter wind. No tails, the elements, ensconced in dens. Arrive. A small house, well detailed. Cute. A dollhouse. A playhouse. A gingerbread house. You don't go in for sweets. Brush away snow and crouch and peer in a downstairs window. Fat old woman cooking pancakes. Young girl feeding pancakes to a boy in a cage. Wood-fired oven chugging. Old woman cries, Finger! Boy holds out stick and old blind woman feels and screams, Not enough!, and slaps little girl and returns to cooking pancakes. Another window. Man holds down a struggling woman, forearm in her mouth, rips her dress, presses between her legs. Look away, wretch. Get on hands and knees. Another window. Kathleen Bates breaking a man's legs with a sledge hammer. Another window. Woman with feet in stirrups wide-open birthing at

you, screaming, no one to catch the baby. Window. Teenage boy tickling teenage girl in a bedroom, hushed giggling. Again. Bathroom, your eye looking at you huge from a tiny mirror. Flinch. How you look. Again, downstairs, on your stomach, so many windows. Family on a couch watching TV, backs to you. On the TV they watch you, a giant on his belly in the snow outside holding a headless chicken, watching them watch you watching them on TV. They on the TV scream. They in the room watch them scream on the TV silently. Look back at the room with the man ripping the woman's dress. She and he sit on the bed, facing away from each other, crying. Back to the teenager's bedroom. Hands at crotches, yanking, fondling, pulling, exploring, probing, stroking. Birthing room. Baby screams as mother, closed, holds her to her breast. Kitchen. Girl screaming, Never again, shoving old blind woman wailing, Never again, into oven. Bathroom. Still you watching you watch, the mirror a polished shield protecting your sight, reflecting your giant eye, black at center. Misery room. Writer's legs broken. Countenance broken. Blood, sheets, ceiling. Bates nowhere. Family room. Black hole on TV sucking in all matter, all light. Nobody watching. You on the event horizon. Tap on the door with a fingernail. To ask what they know of a scream. To tell them about their screams. To ask help and offer help. To hold the baby if the mother's tired and revenge the rape if it was rape and to prevent teenage pregnancy unless it's love and save the children who saved themselves and plug up the black hole screen. Tap again. To ask for neighborly advice. Tap again and without intention break down the door. House emits a scream. Scream plugged by your finger carried into the doorway by its inertia. Yelp at a prick on your fingertip. Snatch back finger, beaded with your blood at the end. Peer in the doorway, the man of the house drunk and passed out in an armchair, the woman of the house shoving a spear made of a serrated carving knife lashed to a broom handle with a belt into your giant eye. Scream and leap back and drop your stick but not the chicken and clutch your blinded right eye as she screams at him, Do something!, and he does nothing. Stand in pain and seep blood and don't blink and raise and consider what you've learned as she continues screaming, You worthless do-nothing, you want oblivion or completion, maybe you'd sate him! Loom over their house, eye socket welling blood. You've learned nothing. Pick up your stick and raise it to smash the dollhouse that stole half your sight. See the snow collect in the doorway, deadening sound. See the flicker of blue, green, and red from the TV again shimmering on the snow, releasing the light it swallowed. Smell the chimney smoke. Decide the gingerbread house has nothing to do with you. The dolls aren't yours. Another's toys. You are a world unto yourself. Decide the playhouse is not the truth of your scream. Allow your wounded eye to freeze

shut. Feel cold. Decide to use the cold. Pack your useless eye with snow to numb it. Wonder when day will break. Move east to 73.

80.

Can't you answer that?

Answer what?

It's like torture letting it ring.

First, this is a civil question and answer session. A cooperative inquiry. Interrogative, but not interrogating. Second, you can't answer a ringing in your ear. Third, the impossibility of answering a ringing in your ear is why it is torturous.

You're telling me the ringing is just in my ear.

I punched you in one ear and slapped you in the other and then you hear ringing I don't hear. Keep up.

Listen harder.

Cause and effect.

What if it's your mother calling?

My mother doesn't call me. She expects me to call her.

Or your prostitute?

What do you know about my prostitute?

I am you.

Are you a professional interrogator?

What if it's your wife?

Do I have a wife? Will she come back if I answer?

Or the pizza you ordered?

Pizzas cannot call. But will she come back with the pizza if I answer? And if I answer will you finally answer me?

Or an informer calling with information about the scream?

Maybe I'll answer.

Or the police?

Maybe I won't answer.

Is it worth the risk?

Oh my God I don't know – I'll answer, I'll answer, just make it stop –

Who is it?

... Dial tone.

You were too late. Took too long. You missed your –

Did the ringing stop?

Yes.

Thank God.

You thank God at 84.

81.

The head turns on a flashlight and looks you in the eye. Its eyes shrink into their sockets and look away. The head swallows its words and its sympathy and its scream. The head retreats into darkness. You gag your tongue up from your throat and cough without sound, hacking phlegm and blood and what are perhaps flecks of lung and hives of alveoli into a small pile. Your ear hurts and you don't know why. You wonder what monstrous cry you made to draw another to you. What could have possessed you to utter sound. To draw attention to yourself, a one-eyed, one-handed, deaf mute hiding from daylight, waiting for night, living in silence like a monk whose head is full of truth beyond language. Want beyond language. What could have moved you to utterance. To attempt communication. How was your sound different from any other sound you've never heard? You don't wonder in words because you've never heard language. You don't talk to yourself in your head. You pull your cowl around you and slink into the night of 86.

82.

What you think of forever in your tunnel made either for those smaller than you or to shrink you into one of them:

Who built this labyrinth? Incas? Egyptians? Greeks? Cretans?

Now that you see the stonework up close, rather don't see because there is no light but feel pressed into your chest and back, grinding the back of your head and tip of your nose, caressing the palm and back of your hand simultaneously, you detect that the stone is not roughhewn but fine chiseled, not unfinished but precise, not clumsy and inexpert and thrown together without the proper time due to the distraction of bodily needs and familial responsibilities and economic uncertainties and social obligations and technological conveniences and over communications, but designed and old, or made to look it, and the product of long devotion to the intricacies of a craft.

Who had the tools, the ability, the slavery, the abundance, the collective attention span, the time to construct such an elaborate and perhaps useless structure? Who would devote their life and the lives of others to a monumental act of brutal delicacy, to art, to the crush of walls, to the repetition of hand wrought joints.

It's religious.

Is this a cathedral or a mosque or a temple or a shrine or a tomb or a sacrificial altar or a place of worship? Does the structure reflect a belief

system? Small three-choice caverns connected obscurely by crushing passages of forever, no map provided, vague tasks provided, you within, unsure how completing the given tasks will abet your exit or ameliorate your condition or catch a scream.

The subtle curves and elusive slopes are graceful, as if you could rip the structure down with the slightest push, as you did once upon a time in “There is a Monster at the End of This Book”. But you cannot. The walls are made of polished stone and the point is unsubtle, obvious, manifest, oft repeated without care for redundancy, rocklike: You are trapped and there may be no way out. The walls are made of reflective black obsidian, opaque white marble, sparkle-flecked granite, carved by the loving pounding of hand and hammer and chisel and polished by the gentle abrasion of other stones or coarse sand or soft rags or by the passage of many bodies and the incessant rubbing of skin, polished to low friction, thank god, if not to frictionlessness, thank god. The walls are stone, stones huge and unique and vaguely trapezoidal and fit together without chinking, without space between for a fingernail to claw, for water to drip, for air to infiltrate, for light to enter.

How did they move the stones? Did Atlas position the enormous stones carved by skilled workers as laid out by the master architect? Is that how he was trapped here, tricked into building the Labyrinth around himself? Will the same happen to you? Will you be abandoned here after your small contribution to these confines, another round of skin polish or a deposit of epithelial tissue or a stone moved a fraction of an inch or the new construction of a wall of words. Once you fulfill your uncertain purpose, will you be left like caulk tubes and bent nails and beer cans in the crawl space under a newly constructed house?

You are released into another chamber, dark but with torch light reflected ad nauseam off walls of stone, three narrow passages leading off, one of which you just passed through. You take a deep breath. There is nowhere but forward.

If forward is north, then slip forever to 122.

If forward is south, then wriggle forever to 130.

If forward is west, then scuttle forever to 109.

83.

Middleofthenight. You keep you awake by holding your pee. Peering through snow for the white line to steer by. You swing into a reststop to let the snowplows plow and the whiteout subside. Idling semis. A beat three-quarter ton with twenty-four hay bales in the bed. A Geo Metro with unsustainable gas mileage. Pee leaking. You squeeze into the gold lamé jacket and enter the

boundless whiteout and waddle inside, your legs white as snow in black cowboy boots, your fists clenched in justforshow nonfunctional jacket pockets, your knuckles in brass knuckles in case of a pervert or creep or lonely trucker, and in the overheated bathroom sit your sore ass on the toilet without having to drop trousers and pee slow and hard while taking a fastfood greasebomb dump. You feel rejuvenated. Into the roaring gale and sideways snow pelting your head and stinging your legs. Into the ambulance through the driver's door like normal so no one sees you open the rear door to know where you lie. Into the back and peel off the jacket and slip from the boots and don't turn on a light and punch the ceiling and the bed folds down and there you lie warm under an alpacawool blanket and goosedown comforter and sleep fitfully as the ambulance rocks in the wind and snow pellets tap nonstop.

You wake unrested from a dream of a city in the trees like noplace you've been or seen except in your mind's eye while reading, the ground far out of sight below, houses built in the crooks of great branches, trunks growing up through the center, walkways hanging in the air, suspended platforms on which are bonfires and pigs crackling on spits and from which descend steps to dangling outhouses with holes open to air and other steps to pendulant hunting blinds where men and women stare down through monocles, bows ready and arrows notched, shafts fixed to long lengths of fine silk cord run through pulleys, while through other pulleys ropes pull up buckets of water to multilevel open floor plan towers as the young swing in on vines with baskets of fleshy red or orange or yellow fruit on their backs and all is shared, nothing bought, and around the bonfire people feast and sing and play skin drums and dance clad in animal skins and furs and feathers, burned-out wooden bowls of mead passed hand-to-hand, laughter passed mouth-to-mouth, lovers tumbling off to copulate under down blankets in swaying hammocks – as at all their crafts they are practiced and skilled and of sufficient flexibility to fornicate enjoyably in hammocks and orgasm slowly or quickly or loudly or quietly as is their want – sky above and below and no one has to get up for work in the morning because the work they do is not work; it's what they want to do; no one has to do anything; no one is under anyone's thumb; what they want to do and what must be done align: hunting, fruit-picking, tailoring, constructing, cooking, fire building, loving, storytelling; if no one wants to do it, it need not be done; they do it without questioning, without having to choose, without thinking too hard, without agonizing over every inconsequential action and inaction, with a humble invigorating eastern acceptance that splinters are a way of life in a city of wood hung in the trees and that sometimes toddlers will toddle over the edge and if you have open air dangling shitters no one has to clean them and what's below

will be shat on and when you copulate you increase the chances of pregnancy and it doesn't matter who the father is because the society is egalitarian and they're all the same and everyone is as beautiful or as rugged as everyone else and the community will contribute equally to the care of your treechild whether the father is the corpulent chief or the charismatic lead architect or the menial firewood collector or the androgynous daycare provider or the inbred ward of the state you pitied and fulfilled your social contract with last week or the drunk whose name you forget but whose puke you watched fall and fall and fall – you begrudge none a child; the child is the trees' – to each his own and give what you can and take what you need and align your thoughts with the spreading boughs and your emotions with the rustling leaves and drink the sap of the tapped trunks and if deviance rises in your xylem spread your arms wide and raise your face to the infinite stars and the radiant undulations of the northern lights and transport the expansiveness down through your phloem and grow another layer around your core and submit to the lithe diaphanous greenpinkpurple veils washing over you and the interstellar darkness incorporating you and the distant yip of coyotes raining on you and the chirp of birds dewing with dawn reawakening you to the community as the throaty owl hoots that there is no solitude and the treed rooster crows that there are no hangovers and the daughters and sons rise to frolic anew in the sun's red glory from where they fell exhausted under the stars or from their beds if their grandfathers carried them and tucked them in and the thinkers rise to speculate on how to farm the clouds and the genetically enhanced rise, no, awaken, no, they do nothing but be, they are self-contained, they photosynthesize, needing only water and light.

It's the kind of dream you hate. You don't hug trees or embrace children or dance around fires or sit in drumcircles or frolic. You don't enjoy sex. Your ambulance no longer rocks, but the tapping persists at the driverside window. You see your breath. Blanket around your shoulders and brass knuckles around your knuckles, in a sleep haze, you crawl to the front and roll down the window onto the calm blinding white swoop of plains and an unshaven jowly trucker in a trucker hat whose belly protrudes from the bottom of his plaid shirt. Snow is drifted nearly to the door handle. You say, What? He says, You alright? Beautiful, you say. Wanted to make sure you was alright in there, he says. Bet you did, you say. And let you know the plows've been through, he says. Slow going though, keep it slow, he says. I'll drive how I drive, you say fighting chattering teeth. Times like these, he says, makes me feel like part of a community of truckers, braving the elements, enduring hardship, more than a solitary man in a box. Glad your heart's warmed by the snow, you say rolling up your window. He presses a meaty hand to the window and you stop. Looking to

score some blow, he says taking back his hand to adjust his John Deere or Caterpillar or Fuck Monsanto hat. Cocaine or fellatio?, you ask philosophizing internally on castrating a man with your teeth. Don't go in for that French business, he says, less it's all you got. The main problem is, you think, that you'd never get the taste out of your mouth. Powder'll give me a longer ride, he says, snow's got me in a mood is all. The other problem you hate and blame on the dream and try to ignore but can't is you feel a fondness for this pendulant trucker and his gentle questioning and tender need. Got a hundred, he says. I don't carry illicit drugs, you say thinking that castrating him unhygienically might kill him and dude might have a wife and kids at home and he's just been on the road too long. I'll take the oral sex, then, he says and steps to the window and fumbles at his fly. You could use the money, you think, which makes you not want it. Me first, you say and roll the window all the way down and turn on your back and support your hips with your hands and scoot your legs out the window. What's this?, he says. Only fair, you say without protection prepared for whatever he does to make you want to scream, prepared to not scream, to endure the man quietly, tearlessly, outside yourself, the pain a mechanism for separating from yourself, for escape, prepared even to endure the unlikely event of pleasure, your ass hung out the door, legs on his shoulders in the cold air. Okay, you say pressing up on the small of your back with your brass knuckles. He doesn't do anything. You stare at the ceiling. Come on, you say. Your crotch is cold and you wonder why some men take so long. You've a high tolerance for many things – pain, pleasure, screams, poverty, depravation – but you cannot endure the stamina of others. Do your worst and see if I feel it, you implore. He says, I'm sorry, you're right, it would be fair, do unto others as you would have done unto you, the trucker goldenrule brotherhood, flashing the brights when you can pull in ahead of me, drafting on your tail, calling on the cb when you see a pig, and ... He lays his hand on you, lets it lie. It's warm. He removes it. I can't, he says. Ain't seen something so beautiful in a long time, he says, what with the vast soft background of snow. His voice cracks. But my wife, you know, he says.

You worm your lowerbody back in the ambulance and curse you for exposing your vulnerability and brace to throw a punch of brass knuckles in his fat faithful face to will his temperate blood hot in the cold snow. You cock, but he is crunching away. Wait, you say, in spite of yourself. He turns. How far to tree town?, you ask. He gazes into the hills. From that McDonald's that I smell you stopped at, must be about halfway there, he says. Drive slow now, pretty lady. He crunches on and climbs into his warm idling truck and pulls out. You start the ambulance and then let it run, keys in the ignition, as you go into the reststop restroom and wash the ache away in the sink and stare into the mirror. At least

you have no hair to be disheveled, you think, no underwear to find. You pull out a half-hour later. You quickly catch up to the truck of whogivesashit description and its driver you bared your crux to and who wouldn't defile it or honor it or hate it or love it or hurt it or please it or communicate with it and step on it to pass him and leave him receding behind you in the mirror and forget him like you do all your dreams as you lurch by the cars stranded in the ditch to 61.

84.

You thank God for the silence. He does not respond. Spurned, you ask him what he's doing about the scream. He does not respond. In the silence you remember the task you've chosen. You pull the lamp chain and turn up the three-way incandescent.

Don't make this about me, you say to you. There could be real people out there dead and dying. There could be real people in danger. There could be real people, and there is an unaccounted-for scream on the loose. You're gonna give me an answer whether you know it or not.

You turn the light up again emphatically, but you over emphasize and yank the chain out of the lamp. The light will be on high for the remainder of the non-interrogation. You won't employ a disorienting oscillation between darkness and varying intensities of light. You won't employ the fear of the unknown within a darkness reinforced by a temporary light-induced blindness. Instead you'll rely on the fear of the unknown behind the light. And in the light. A lack of light is not necessary for the presence of unknowns. You could unplug the light, but you don't want to. You could look away from it. Your head is not strapped; your eyelids are not propped, not yet. But you don't. Because perhaps this pollutive, punitive, triune incandescence stinking of burning hair is a symbol for God, and perhaps if you stare into it long enough it will provide the answers demanded of you. Red and orange and purple dots dance on a field of writhing white. You smell your retina searing. Your ears smart. You are sorry.

I'm sorry, you say, but I know nothing of the scream.

You kneel, bring your mouth near your ear, and whisper.

I'm not afraid to sacrifice you for the good of all. I'm not opposed to defiling myself on the off chance there are real people to help. I will choose to make you, and thus me, us, less than human if there is a chance it will mollify those who are not us or serve as our penitence or increase the possibility of curing humanity of this, of our, scream. There is a chance.

You sharpen a pencil with a child's plastic pencil sharpener. Shavings fall in your lap.

I'm sorry –

You pierce your earlobe with the pencil and shriek.

Not that scream.

I'm sorry.

You lick the bead of blood from your earlobe and whimper.

Not that one.

I'm sorry.

You rummage in the desk but can't find the scissors so you take your ear in your mouth and bite. You cry out to God and thrash your head and clamp down with your incisors and rip off the ear and clutch where it was, screaming.

Not that one, exactly, you say with your mouth full, but much closer.

You can no longer apologize for knowing nothing. You clutch at an absence on the side of your head and breathe raggedly post-scream and use the transport of pain to not be here. Or to pretend you're not. You press a piece of paper over the wound to staunch the bleeding while you cry quietly and chew the ear, which tastes like it isn't yours, a pig's ear or a man-made piece of rubber infused with blood. Chew the ear until you choose to swallow at 91.

85.

You could go anywhere. Pristine snow-covered fields spread in every direction. In one direction flats nearathand are betrayed by gentle swells and seductive dales that are lent veracity by the sheer severity of distant craggy pinnacles. In the other direction flats are betrayed by gently downward sloping flats. You cannot go anywhere. You have already narrowed every direction to two directions and made the infinite linear. You will go somewhere, but not anywhere. There is a narrow path broken before you in the only direction, towards the mountains. The path has been trod this winter, however long winter lasts in this land. To stray from the path would be to enter a white expanse of wilderness. The tracks lead somewhere, somewhere people are, or have been, or are going to. The tracklessness of the wilderness is likely to lead nowhere, unless you are willing to found a somewhere in the nowhere, to build and advertise and publicize and entice and enrich so that others will join you, following your tracks, creating more tracks to be followed by more followers, unless or until you fail and your brief somewhere reverts to being another nowhere. The thought exhausts you before you begin. You don't. You're too old. You don't have the energy or the time or the desire. You shuffle after a scream. Telling yourself that is how you got through the Labyrinth, telling yourself you pursue a scream, so you keep telling yourself that. Believing it is how you persevere on a path through a snow-drunk wilderness. It's not a wilderness like you think of wilderness: thickly wooded, dark, impenetrable. Bare solitary trees dot the

landscape like scattered black bones ripped from the page. The mountains are days away on the horizon. This wilderness is an open book. A blankness. It would be a desert if not for all the frozen water. Without the snow, you imagine you'd be in the high arid plains. But you're not without the snow, there's no point to the imagining. There are no beasts of prey hunting no rodents scurrying no birds scavenging or soaring or singing in the whiteness. The sun is up, the sky blue, the sunlight bouncing off the snow blinding you. It's taking you a while to get the hang of discerning let alone describing an expansive landscape again after being underground in dark tight confines forever. The sun glares up at you from below when you shade your eyes and look down. What you hope are giant windmills and not towering three-armed one-eyed one-legged giants glint like a wave of metallic krill cresting the horizon or like a miniature mirage of an armored phalanx cresting the ridge or like the architectural cresting of a civilization, perhaps indicating the onetime presence of man several hundred miles away or some unimaginable distance for you to traverse barefoot at your age in your delicate condition through the vastness.

You could go anywhere. You follow a path but you feel pathless. All you want is a wall on one side of the path, a low stone wall, a jackleg fence, a post and rail fence where the posts and rails have collapsed, a cement median highway barrier, a friendly neighborhood chainlink fence, a 3-stranded electric wire, a high cement border wall topped with razor wire and studded with guard towers and turrets from which gun barrels flash, a Chinese Wall, a Hadrian's Wall, a Berlin Wall, an invisible dog fence, a stretched barbwire fence on the prairie, anything to lean on, to run your hand along, to rub your shoulder against, a place to rest your head and hold your hand and guide you. A delineation. But there are no walls, only soft inviting snow and a partially broken trail where another has or others have wandered. Through terrain inhospitable. You could build a snow cave. Is that a thread of smoke rising from a fire or steam from a hot spring or fog from an average temperature river in the distance? Everything is in the distance, miles and miles of snow between. You're pretty cold. You miss your walking stick. You could turn off the path, turn away from the footsteps. Anywhere else could be better, or worse. What happened to your walking stick? You turn sideways for old time's sake and shuffle sideways on the path, slowing yourself further if that's possible, allowing yourself to be supported by the immense vacuity of landscape at your back and the innumerable possibilities at front. Yes there are mountains rising hard in the distance before you like great rocks. Aren't you too old for this? Aren't your obsessions those of a young man? The old aren't supposed to wonder what to do, how to live, where to go. They've already done it. You are in the unnatural position of being old with significant

choices to make. Maybe they aren't significant. Quite a few if not all of the available choices, you imagine, result in you dying alone in the snow without negative or positive consequence for anyone. The available choices are anything. You're free to enumerate them, or anything, to do anything, including nothing. Maybe you're worn out from enumerating or not enumerating. You are cold. Say anything you want. You are invisible and unbothered by propriety or duty or expectations. You are old and you long to be squeezed. The vast available choices squeeze you like a python or a lemon wedge or a bear hug or a garlic clove in the press. You are comforted. Comfort is not what you want. What kind of squeeze do you want? Ecstatic orgasmic rapturic transubstantiative transmigrational transcendent transporting? All the choices, all the endless possibilities of how to be squeezed into a word and deposited on a blank white slate, all the epiphanies you free associate from you wandering into the white wilderness end with your death. The same place you imagine this lightly-trodden path ends. The boundless ways the rest of your story could be writ and their common terminus loom or wall or bind or hem you into the path and give you no choice but to shuffle sideways and keep on to see if there is a scream for you somewhere, the choice you committed yourself to ages ago, the purpose which defines you. The chase of the scream is you and to abandon it now would negate yourself. A bald eagle circles in the blue sky. A black and green forest of pine and fir and spruce coalesces on a white slope. A rock spire juts. Untrammeled whiteness spreads. A frozen waterfall glitters. A windmill or turbine is frozen motionless. Somewhere is a frozen lake in which come spring fish will jump for flies. All is snow silent. The cap squeezes your head. The world is enormous and beautiful and crushing and forever out of reach, but with your Labyrinthian experience you slip through a crack into 76.

86.

You smell an imminent scream and follow it. While you do, you do not have a stream of consciousness you are conscious of but a stream of sensations and reactions and desires unencumbered by reflection. You're not a narrator. You walk steadily covering unheard of distances, eye focused unwaveringly ahead, body following nose, thoughts inaccessible if they exist.

An isolated house stands in a field buried under snow sparkling in moonlight you squint against. The snow softens all edges: mailbox, fence posts, roofline, abandoned tractor, stairs to the front porch. You feel the snow crunch under your boots. The snow is unmarred by tracks except those left behind by your approach.

You pound on the door with your stick and wait. A gentle fold in the snow to

the right beyond the barn might be a creek or an irrigation canal or a drainage ditch. A copse of trees stands beyond. Power and telephone lines to the left rise and fall and rise from pole to solitary pole, climbing over a rise in the snow and gone. There are no other houses in sight.

You pound again and lean your stick against the doorframe and pinch your nose while you wait.

You try the door handle and the door opens. A living room. Furniture under white sheets: couch, coffee table, overstuffed chair. Lampshades in plastic. Dust poofs as you step in. A brick fireplace. Above it a mantle bearing a still clock and a candelabra and pictures of a wedding, of old people, of babies, of a young man on a chestnut horse in falling snow, of a fully-clothed woman half-immersed in a pool below a waterfall. Before the hearth, the dining room table sits out of place. There are no tracks in the dust. Wood floors. Wood table. Wood coffin on the table. The coffin is open. You leave tracks walking up to it. The coffin is full-sized but in it is a baby. If you make a noise you don't know it. The baby is gray and withered and sunken and for this resembles both an old shrunken man and ultrasound images of itself in the womb. You wait, staring at the dead child, at the space in the box. The baby asks nothing of you. It gives no indication of why it died. Its smell is gone, the milk breath and the putrefaction evaporated, chortling and crying absorbed. With your nub you reach out to stroke it, poke it, caress it, prod it. It rocks like a dry leaf. No last gasp. The baby contains no more scream. You assume you did not scream when you saw the dead baby because you feel no different and you believe you will feel different when you experience the scream you have forever sought. You shut the coffin lid and go to 98. Or you leave it open -- perhaps another will follow in your footsteps and step up to an open coffin they would not have had the volition to open and, encountering a desiccated infant, scream, and perhaps their scream, the scream of one who is capable of screaming, unlike you, will bring it back to life, or perhaps a scream makes no difference to a dead baby, unlike you -- and go to 98.

87.

Snow like ape shit outside. Sit on the stoop and eat your sausage pizza of generous proportions for a personal pizza. Your lip stings and you cannot finish it. Won't finish it. Don't need it. Don't begrudge her your lip but you're a new man now. Of callused self-conception. Raw, used, an orifice. Discarded because you're not the one, never will be the one, there is no one. What that means for what the world has to offer you and what is available for the taking. Incompletion and run-ons and fragments. Performance. Open up your character

and reveal another character. Inside of which is another character. No choosing among them, they're all you. You've changed, matured, embittered. Your paunch shrinks and skin loosens and hair falls out in clumps. Here you are with less strength and more stamina. Used by now to living outdoors, an outdoorsman of the undeveloped or fallow or vacant land, less wilderness than barrenness, that grows between each subsequent dwelling, your house long left behind several houses to the west looming larger in reverse perspective. Fuck that place. Walls and others and you hiding or hidden from the elements. You unable to care for your soft self. The past you. The you unable to do what you said you'd do. The you who believed sitting their softening like butter on the counter in the summer was to an end, who believed in beliefs like changelessness of character, who believed in not believing in beliefs. The you who believed nothing could be done. The you who succeeded the you who worked and lived and believed and had ambition and youth. The you who aged and rotted from the inside out and slowly died until a scream excommunicated you, expelled you, expectorated you. Executed you. That you. Making of that you, this you. Another nobody on the street, a modern mountain man, a vagrant, a survivalist letting yourself be used by others as a receptacle for or a pill to fill the need for love or compassion or accumulation, their need to exploit or help or understand, so you can eat. Until you are empty as a bottle. Dispensed. Ignored. Not ignored but unseen. Background, landscape. Is this another new, changed you? The you who escaped from their usury system of work and debt and consumption. Invisible to them, own yourself. Live a separate life among them. Glean what you need without notice. A road, new used boots, space to take another step.

What has not changed: the scream. Pull your hat down over your patchwork hair, tighten your scarf around your chicken neck, put your gloves on over your rheumatic hands, and chuck the box containing the unwanted half pizza like a Frisbee with an off-center center of gravity, weighted, swooping and jumping and diving and spinning far and away behind the pizza parlor, over the fence, and into the great nothing beyond that you don't give two shits about defiling because you aren't there.

Go east. Toward Enenenen's house, but you're done with cute naming tricks. Wind blasts out of the east, slices through your wool, drives snow into your eyes. Lean into it. Hand frozen in grip, plant the walking stick at every step to brace yourself. Trudge empty-minded step-by-step through snow and wind and space. Either the wind increases with every step or you slow as you age with every step or each dwelling requires more steps to reach than the one before, or all three. The next house to the east, the house you slowly approach, taking shape out of the snow, is only as tall as you. The house, coalescing, clucks on the

gale, yes, solidifying, is your chicken coop. You dispense with the question before you can ask it. Windblown snow, nothing is solid, certainty is fluid, no one in the world can tell you where a single electron is. A chicken coos at you. You know it's east because the sky is lightening before you. A blue strip separates land and sky. Stoop to look in the coop through their window. All perched on their roosts, orange under the heat lamp. Warm. Alien. Black eyes staring. Shells hardening around unfertilized embryos. A dozen birds. Their house raised to give them dry space underneath for a dust bath and for their feed to hang and sway in the squall. You were once so considerate at design. Their house is cozy. You could sleep well and warm in wood shavings under the heat lamp. Open the hatch to the egg boxes, the entry from which you used to change their bedding. Warmth spills out. The hens stir, murmur among themselves. Reach a hand in, then the arm up to the shoulder, then your head, and the other shoulder and its arm, then your chest and --. The rest doesn't fit. The ammonia reek of chicken shit heaped on chicken shit. Eggs are piled high in the boxes, uncollected, broken and eaten by the malnourished, haggard hens who laid them. In the wood shavings, mite-infested feathers they've pulled mix with their excrement and half-consumed, unfertilized progeny. Don't cry for them. They're chickens. They've faired no worse than you if worse without you. Take one, the black star, the strongest, top of the pecking order, by the feet. An explosion of squawking around your head. You are pecked in the face and beaten with wings. Close your eyes and protect your face with your free arm and squirm your upper body out of the coop. Drag the hen from her house. Turn her upside down. She gives one squawk of inverted surrender and stops fighting. Shut the hatch. Chickens can't scream. Pull the top off your walking stick, unsheathing a blade. Hold her head to the block under your boot and cut off her head. She spasms, stills. Only the gale to hear. Carry her by the legs, wings fallen open and draining blood, you with no appetite at your age, east toward 79.

88.

- This is the cops. What can we do for you today?
- Tonight?
- Tonight?
- Today is in the past. You can do nothing for me then. It's tonight, ma'am.
- Who's the cops here?
- I'm a detective.
- Give me your identification number or secret handshake or dumb name.
- I detected a scream.
- A scream. Tonight?

-- Yes, although it might've verged on today.

-- Where?

-- From either the east or the west. It sounded like it came from a neighbor's house. I have neighbors to the east and to the west of me. As well as in other directions, but I'm helping you focus your investigation by narrowing your options. I suggest you begin with either my East Neighbor or West Neighbor, your choice.

-- How kind, sir.

-- I live at --

-- We know where you live, Mr. --

-- Park around the corner and walk down the alley and knock on my back door if you'd like to talk to me in person. I prefer to keep a low profile to establish the uncertainty of my existence.

-- We know your predilections, Mr. --

-- I prefer to not be met in person period.

-- Or is this Mrs. --?

-- Is there a Mrs.?

-- Is there?

-- How do you know where I live, ma'am?

-- We deliver pizzas and predilections to your house regularly. You're in the system.

-- I must work on existing less, to escape the system.

-- Listen.

-- Listening.

-- Are you sure it was a scream?

-- Relatively.

-- What did it sound like?

-- A scream.

-- Could you scream the scream for me, sir?

-- No.

-- Try.

-- Scream.

-- Sir.

-- How'd that do you?

-- You haven't called your mother lately. We'll take care of that for you, for a nominal fee.

-- Thank you, ma'am. There are other services I could possibly pay for.

-- Very well, sir. We do not personally provide services other than police work and pizzas and phone calls, but we are authorized to call those who do. We will

communicate your personal choices to the predilection sub-contractor, if you would like to pay our predilection communication fee ...

- Yes, do that, please, thank you.
- Very well. Now, where were you at the time of the scream?
- In my house.
- Doing what?
- Nothing, ma'am.
- Nothing?
- Nothing.
- That's impossible, sir.
- And yet.
- It's at the very least a bad choice. What about sleeping, or watching TV, or reading --
- Yes, reading. Call it reading.
- Uh-huh. Where were your wife and kids?
- Do I have a wife and kids?
- You were alone?
- They could've been upstairs.
- Where were your neighbors?
- Perhaps screaming or making people scream or reading.
- Like you.
- Point made.
- Would you mind knocking on your neighbors' doors to see if they're all right?
- I can't knock on their doors at the same time.
- Choose one to knock on first.
- That's what I called you to do, ma'am.
- We're a bit undermanned, see. It's going to take us quite some time to respond.
- My knuckles are soft.
- Then call them.
- I chose to call you because calling people was in the job description you gave me after I called you.
- We could send your mother over right away.
- Is there another nominal fee I can select at this time?
- Of course. The expedite fee.

You don't pay the expedite fee because what is important, such as progress and tranquility and pizza, is not made more valuable by a price tag. You won't be

extorted. Love is free. Hang up and call your West Neighbor at 57.

You pay the expedite fee because your comfort is worth it. The cost is offset by your peace of mind. You continue at 99.

You don't pay the expedite fee because you explicitly decided to not go on an expedition. Some would call this cheap, some would call this standing stationary by your word, you call your East Neighbor at 127.

You hang up and call the cops back at 37 in the hopes of talking to a less economically skilled police customer service representative, one who is less likely to capitalize on your fraught relationship with your mother.

89.

You wait for her. Your pipe is long finished. The office is silent. The bedrooms are upstairs. Three of them.

You wait, fingering your glass, fiddling with whether or not your walking stick is attached to it as a handle. There's no other way out but down the stairs at the bottom of which you sit. There are windows, windows outside of which it snows, windows that could be opened and wriggled through to plop onto the frozen ground cat-like on one's feet or person-like on a nail-studded scrap wood pile.

Is she sufficiently horrified by what she finds upstairs to risk impalement or a broken ankle in escape? Has the abjectness upstairs moved her to despair of the human condition so that she recklessly endangers her own? Perhaps any moment you will hear her scream as she tries to commit suicide by jumping from a second story window, a complicated task to execute.

No, Viola is not you. She will not add to the carnage she may have found upstairs like a masochistic aesthete. She is neither passive nor passive-aggressive, which means she must be aggressive, the only other personality type. She is a confrontationist. If she encounters a scream-able scene upstairs, she will apply reason to identify the culprit, hunt him, and elicit the same scream from him. And where will that reason lead her? It's your house; you're everywhere. If she identifies evidence that hypothetically mutates the possible scene from a potential simple multiple homicide to a probable inconceivable filicide, infanticide, uxoricide, murder-suicide, familicide (thinking up such a scene makes you want to scream No and take the cigar cutter to your right hand for starters), if there is no evidence of anyone having been here but you, if you

implicate yourself with your convergence with the victimized you in the Lay-Z-Boy and by not being upstairs with your slaughtered loves if you have them and by waiting doing nothing on the stairs, she will march down to you and disembowel you and feed you your intestines while squeezing your testicles in a small portable vice and shoving fountain pen after ballpoint pen after dry pen after cheap pen after overpriced pen into your rectum.

She does not race downstairs seeking justice for an upstairs disgrace. Does she find the wretchedness artful? Worthy of the sacrifice? Or is there no dehumanizing scene upstairs? Does she converse with your wife if you have one if she's upstairs? Does she find the communication amenable; is she having difficulty saying Goodbye? Is she playing with your kids if you have any, tossing them up and up and up and they won't allow her to stop, each time calling One more time!, or is she playing imagination in an alternate reality of knights and dragons and princesses and tigers and babies lost in great floods and treasure and bottomless pits and sea-going vessels and galloping horses and murdered mothers and selfish, self-absorbed, overly self-conscious fathers capable of acts of unimaginable cruelty in their solipsistic blindness, and has the children's imagination game become so vivid that she no longer knows what is real and has forgotten about how you wait downstairs? Perhaps you no longer exist for her, or for her you exist in an alternate reality? Does she live in the imagination of children? Or do you? No, does she live not in the imagination but in a world created by the imagination, a world wholly real to her? Is her world, the one where she plays upstairs with your children, real and yours, the one where you wait downstairs for her reaction to what she encounters, unreal?

You wait forever. You wait for someone who is not you and whose existence is therefore separate and either parallel or intersecting or both to yours. Perhaps your sole intersection is in the past. Or perhaps your lives are entwined or encircled or repeatedly crisscrossing or on different planes? Perhaps you have never met. Did she get lost? Or did you, though you haven't left your step? You wait for her to descend and inform you of what is to be found upstairs. What manner of suffering, what love. What happened.

She descends. You ask. She, in a daze out of character for Viola, replies.

-- Nothing. I stepped off the top step onto a landing of nothing, onto a floor of nothing. There is no upstairs. There was no evidence or matter. There were no victims or non-victims. There was no investigation and there was no me. There was nothing. Though I was nothing, I fell and fell and fell in a silence complete, until I landed again on the top step, facing down at the back of your head, and descended to you, here, where you take me by the hand, lead me, and continue to descend with me to 59.

Before your scream chasing adventure, before your rear entry into your West Neighbor's house, before your discomfiting descent, before being lost in a labyrinth, before choosing to take part in this story and before submitting yourself to the acts it forced upon you and before choosing from the limited choices presented you while feeling no nearer the scream you know next to nothing of, before passing sideways forever through passages slowly as you age perceptibly, slackening skin tugged by the stone, unsure if you move and why, unsure if your skin will stay on, unable to breathe but shallowly, unable to expand your chest, unable to lift your arms but straight out to the side, before you knew such a crucified position is difficult to hold, particularly while maintaining forward motion, before you knew holding this position for long periods of time is an ancient method of trial by ordeal called trial by cross, before you knew holding your arms in this position longer than others with whom you dispute a truth validates your truth, before you were unable to move your legs forward and back and your new forward and back became side-to-side, how that strengthens your abductors, not to mention your adductors and gluteus medius and minimus and tensor fasciae latae, but most distinctly your abductors, while other muscles atrophy, before this blinding darkness, before you forgot everything except how desperately you must reach another chamber even if it's small and walled, a bit of air even if it's poisoned by carbon monoxide from the torch fumes, a bit of light even if it's as flickering as your spouse's or companion's or lover's love, a bit of space, before you wept from never arriving and nowhere to go and confined trapped in walls spacelessness closing and enclosed breathlessly and heart hammering beating pounding in your ribcage and brain sweating straining against your skull and insides turning churning self-consuming nauseous vomit can I die now, you never knew you were claustrophobic. There were indications. In an elementary art class, making papier-mâché masks, lying on a table, waiting for the wet strips of newspaper covering your face to dry, your stomach flipped and you were seized by terrors and ripped off the mask, ruining it and necessitating a repeat of the torture to make another death mask before decorating it with feathers and marbles and paint, and puked in the trashcan. And how you always avoided spelunking. But you weren't a detective then. You reflect on how much your claustrophobia explains your life. Your need to always get out, your constant feeling of entrapment in your situation, your desire to live and play and work outside, your inability to start a conversation and once begun maintain and then always looking and failing to find an exit, your sense of futility, your fantasies of outdoor lovemaking, your desire for the sun, the relief when you look at the sky,

the more so when the clouds are few and you can see blue, sun, stars. There is no sky now. You think about how your low level claustrophobia has defined you. That it is possible you are nothing without it. That it is the spine of your life, actions, professional decisions, relationships, goals, longings, daily existence. You strive to have more thoughts about your claustrophobia to distract you from your current claustrophobia, but you can't, about how you can now decipher your torments and joys and successes and failures and inability to move or breathe, but you are crushed by immense weight pressing in on all sides and nowhere to go no escape no breath tears leaking no rational thought nausea rising but where will the vomit go no space please pass out please god trembling please unconsciousness –

You collapse unsupported in another cube of space limited by four walls, three of which are slotted with narrow passages, one of which bears a message lit by a torch:

Atlas is in a room as close to the entrance room to the Labyrinth as one can be without being in the entrance itself. There are 4 such rooms equidistant from the entrance, a distance termed forever, but there is no passage directly connecting the entrance to Atlas's room. Atlas's room is designated G in the long forgotten architect's design; the entry room is designated A; this room is designated C.

A hint. Relief. Uncertainty. Helplessness. Not knowing the design confining you, confines closing on you. Below the hint:

If you turn east, then writhe forever to 122.
If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 114.
If you turn north, then slip forever to 54.

91.

You chase your ear like a tail with a shot of whiskey you offer yourself from the table beside you, sniffing it first to be sure it's whiskey. The whiskey dulls the pain and lubricates the passage of the ear, which was hard to swallow. The whiskey burns. Under your reading light you finger ragged flesh to try to imagine what the absence looks like. A crescent moon shaped wound wraps around your right ear hole.

The vast majority of your ear yet remains in your head, you console yourself. I need to pee, you change the subject.

Your outer ear was superficial and is no more, you reassure yourself.

You need to pee, you deflect yourself.

You can hold it, you encourage yourself.

You stay put in the chair while you shuffle in your slippers to find the

bathroom in your house, wherever it is, not far but out of the light, and pee. You pee plenty. It's a relief. The you in the chair stares into the light, cupping your right hand to the crescent wound as if it were a replacement pinna, as if it is a toilet bowl funneling sound into your ear drain, your eardrum the trembling wastewater surface, your middle ear the S-curve and siphon jet mechanism, your inner ear the serpentine wastewater outlet emptying into the unseen, internal, buried sewer. You listen to yourself pee loudly, a torrent unleashed into frothing water. You also need to pee, but you do not because you are still human, with a measure of dignity despite what you've done and will do to yourself. You will not pee yourself in your chair, you promise yourself. You clamp down. It is a matter of will, an endurance test, a stress position, a trial by ordeal. You could stand and walk to the bathroom if you were willing to be a quitter, if you could unsubmit to truth extraction via enhanced non-interrogation, if you were the kind of person who gives up on your word.

You return with needlenose pliers.

The bathroom isn't where these go, you state a question.

I didn't put them there.

Who did?

One of the kids. Our wife.

Do you attest then that we have a wife and kids? Where are they?

Maybe they're not pliers. Maybe they're nail clippers.

Yes, your nails are unhygienically long. Allow me to trim them –

Wait. I can do it.

Tell me about the scream or I'll pull off your fingernails.

Really they'll look more socially acceptable and less offensive to others if I manicure my own fingernails under which a trove of compacted brown debris collects. Allow me to trim with the nail clippers, wire cutters, tin snips, or scissors. Or if the implement is needlenose pliers, with the blades near its fulcrum. Please.

Which finger should we start with?

The right pinky.

That looks like it hurts.

Yes.

I apologize. Allow me to rummage in our desk for a moment.

The painkillers?

Yes, there, finger trimmers, you agree slipping your cigar cutter over your right pinky and pulling the finger taught atop the desk with the needlenose pliers clamped to your nail. Pulling out a claw hammer with a shrug, you continue, Now don't twitch or I might make a mess. Are you prepared to answer your

questions to the best of your knowledge?

Yes, I am.

Go to 7.

92.

You ascend the stairs. The ascent is much as you remember the descent, what you can remember, except in reverse. It was long ago; you were someone else then. There is relief in the ascent. The relief is disappointing. The ascent takes forever, but for you forever no longer means what it used to mean. You have survived many forevers. You are old now. Older, you imagine, than is possible. You are accustomed to tight confines. The stairway begins to feel spacious

and for the first time in some time you miss clothes. You reach the top, ground level, the surface. You stand on the landing. Thank god there is only one door. On the door handle hangs a stocking cap into which is stitched,

The Cap of Invisibility.

You don it. Nevertheless, either because you don't trust whoever left it for you or from a bout of self-consciousness at the possibility of meeting people, real people, after so long (have they missed you, are they waiting on the other side of the door in your West Neighbor's living room, will there be a parade, is anyone who knew you still alive, has time passed on the surface as it has underground, will the world beyond the door be wide or narrow and if wide where will you go and if narrow what shape will define your path, will people still exist and if so will you flee them and return to your private labyrinth in an act of recidivism or will you love people again after striving in solitude, presumably to return to them, for forever and ever, will you tremble when you are alone, will the light blind you or will you be afraid of the dark or both) you unwind the scarf from the gorgon head and wrap it around your loins as briefs. You hold the head up by its dreads and say goodbye to your silent Labyrinth companion, but though it has been more steadfast than any lover or spouse or significant other you may have had you cannot bring yourself to look at it. You leave the head on the landing to spare those who await you outside the door or any who enter this door after you. To spare them the neverending torment of the Labyrinth. To spare them becoming what you've become. A wizened monster. To allow them the grace of turning to stone. For yourself abandon that self-saving option, which you never utilized, unable to surrender the notion that the point is to keep on, unable to attend to what you became while you kept on. How long has it been since you

bathed? Perhaps all whom you encounter, all those who wait beyond the door, will scream at the sight or non-sight of you and their collective scream will be the scream you seek and you, fulfilled and terrorized, will drop dead. Hopeful, you open the door and step through into winter. Into snow. There is no house. No one waits for you. You are alone in a vast white landscape. It is unclear if you exit in a different place than you entered or if over the aeons your neighborhood and city and civilization have been laid to waste. A set of footprints trudge away in the snow. You follow them to 85.

93.

Jubilant as an appendage of a triumphant team, you ask, Where did the scream originate?

With self-confidence that some would call egotistical but that would lead you to more success than they if it were real, you answer,

My West Neighbor's bedroom. Go to 146.
I don't know. Go to 100.

94.

Not sure you can hear the question because of your recent ear infection, not to mention you hit yourself in both ears and ate one of them, you say loudly, like when you're talking to a foreigner or a blind person or telling the neighbor's dog to not shit in your yard, Where did the scream originate?

Having heard the previous question well enough, disconcerted by the newfound volume, you sputter,

Upstairs. Go to 147.
I don't know. Go to 102.

95.

Sucking on your ring finger like a popsicle, you provide positive reinforcement, Remember recently when you answered correctly ... be proud of your accomplishment and repeat it. When you don't respond, you hazard as near to the same question as you can venture, Where did the scream originate?

Repeatedly rocking forward with outstretched tongue in failed attempt after failed attempt to lap the blood oozing from the nub of your right ring finger, what was your middle finger wearing the cigar cutter like a ring, you mumble unintelligibly,

The scream originated in the sewers of history, in the bowels of the subconscious, in the waste treatment facility of existence. Go to 148.

I don't know. Go to 104.

96.

As you chomp on your middle finger, then after you slam it down when you realize you can no longer feel the detached digit, you play mean cop and scream, Where did the scream originate?

Wishing your middle finger were still attached and you were chewing on it because you believe the pain of its presence would be less or more bearable or somehow better than the pain of its absence – you must believe in a condition better than your current condition, in room for improvement, in a right answer – you stutter,

F-f-from this chair. Go to 149.

I d-d-d-don't know. Go to 106.

97.

Into the drainage ditch through the bevy of plastic water bottles and licked clean tin cans of peaches in heavy syrup and pears in medium syrup and pineapple in light syrup and compound rubber tires bald or with 2/32" or 4/32" or over 6/32" of tread concealing their radial carcasses of polyester or steel or fiberglass or kevlar cupping ice that will melt into stagnant mosquito hatcheries come spring and tides of styrofoam peanuts and tideflats of styrofoam packing blocks and estuaries of styrofoam coffee cups and fish rot laced styrofoam coolers decomposing at an oceanic pace into a film of styrofoam fish eggs hatching or rather styrofoam snow never melting and plastic bags disintegrating slower than the human race and drained glass beer bottles transporting SOS messages on their empty stinking insides and discarded lidded tupperwares bulging with forgotten fluorescent leftovers and through a mountain of white drywall laced in black mold woven with vermiculite insulation fortified with asbestos and through long dark passages of lead pipe. You chase and are chased. In plastic ruins. You scrabble out of the ditch and spin twice in the night. The scent of the rat is lost in the current of refuse. The half-hound is hot on your tail. You dive back into the drainage ditch. With no time to choose downstream or upstream you choose downstream, weaving and bobbing through the fingerprint of your community, the source material for a retrospective computer generated image of your culture, the artifacts for a future anthropological reconstruction of your civilization. Through trash. No fading scent, no biodegradable rat narrative, no mutating myth of the chase, no dead plot points shed like hair or antlers or skin whose complications elucidate the meaning of a scream, no cat and dog or cat and mouse or mouse and dog story that has through generations of retelling

sublimated into your subconscious and our material being without leaving tracks or a chemical signature or radioactive markers in the drainage ditch, a story now intrinsic, untold, unknown, everywhere. You weave through heaps of composting words. Their stench. Nothing of the rat. You tire. You want to give up, let the flow of history carry you away. You're a cat for god's sake, and cats do not work this hard. But the dog won't quit. You double back upstream, executing a one-eighty around a glowing leaking thirty-gallon drum painted with the skull and crossbones. The half-terrier is caught off guard and you slip by him. He recovers deftly. The instinct to climb a tree and foil the dog and recover from your labor and wait for a fireman on a ladder to pluck you and cradle you and give you to an old lady you can wrap around your little paw crystalizes. The instinct to chase the rat and momentarily reduce the number of deviant vermin in the world by one and toy with it for fun while you kill it slowly and discover if it knows anything about the scream, make it know something about the scream, dissolves. So much bother, and for what? Your belly is already full of your West Neighbor. The rat is, if a mortal enemy, a plaything. And what of the hound, that idealistic, ardent, unimaginative, faithful bore who will hound you relentlessly and deny you the decorous patient delicate gratification of playfully torturing the rat. You slow to a lope through a petroleum rainbow sheened effluence or slink around it to keep your paws pristine though it's out of the way and will take longer and try your cat patience through weathered gray extruded detritus or perhaps more specifically molded plastic action figures arranged by someone who's not here in battle poses and graphic sexual positions and consider pausing to lick yourself again to clear your head behind a hubcap propped against a file box of molding papers, the hubcap painted with a generic animé medusa piquing your curiosity but before you can pause you come upon the remains of two bodies clutching each other, looking like each other in their black decomposition and sloughed skin and maggot infestation, who might look like you if you were not a cat and they were not so far beyond identification that not even the rat, your rat, or any of the other rats surely inhabiting this dump ditch, will touch them. You stop. Something tells you the corpses are brothers, perhaps identical twins, but you are uninterested in specifying what. The rat is present. The rat does not notice you. The rat has not chosen the corpses. The rat is wholly immersed in an ajar pizza box. The rat eats a fresh warm half-eaten anchovy-topped pizza. You do not care for pizza, though you are fond of anchovies. You, a cat, act. Without thought you pounce on the rat and dig your claws in but the hound is there and you release the rat and leap away with a shriek as the terrier in the hound bites into the neck of the stunned rat. The rat squeals. Hair on end, tail up, back arched, you watch. The dog shakes the rat like a chew toy, whipping

it from side to side, breaking its neck repeatedly. The dog drops the quiet rat. It lands with a dull thud on the pizza box. A mist of atomized blood drifts in a sudden stream of moonshine, a red cloud caught in white light, and disperses. The bloodhound in the terrier circles the corpses, sniffing, smelling. The dog sits. He bellows at the sky. The wolf in the hound-terrier howls at the moon glowing behind the clouds in an expression of existential ache. The dog in the wolf howls as if he's lost his best friend. As the howling continues without build or arc or dramatic structure, you curl up in a basket full of plastic easter grass and wait for some climactic lament. After a time, the anthropomorphized soul in the dog stops howling and consoles himself with the half pizza. Despite yourself you feel a little sorry for the dog, voyeuristically -- you're not going to help, he's a dog, there's nothing to do, he needs to mourn, you enjoy watching him mourn, it's not your fault dogs submit to man, love masters, plus he rashly ruined your fun, a dead rat is an inferior plaything to a live one and less informative, it'll never tell you what it's like to infect others with epidemic diseases or gnaw on a corpse, no you did that, nor why the corpse no longer has the spark of life or a head and where the spark and head went, or why you don't understand your West Neighbor better even though you ate some of him, or what your West Neighbor's scream was like, if his scream was in fact the scream you heard, your scream, a scruple to which you feel a feline whatever, nor will it enlighten you as to what it is to be a captive animal toyed with, how it feels to prefer to be dead, to be hunted, you know what it is to be hunted, but to be feared, to live in the dark, in the crevices, in sewers and walls, to be beyond extermination, you have been prevented from finding out what it's like to be a rat by your neighbor's dense, pathetic, sorrowful canine -- if not particularly empathetically. Pleasure in the dog's misery and the undesired pang of compassion entice you to choose to rest in your basket and witness your pursuer's sadness rather than escape him. The night's been long, and it's not over. You rest. When you wake in 65, it is still night and it has begun to snow and the dog is nowhere.

98.

The stairs pop and crack underfoot. At the top is a long hall. From behind the closed door at the end comes a thud you feel in your chest. A faint light leaks from under the door. The sourness of unwashed woman seeps from you know not where. Another thud vibrates the house, speaking to you. Is she behind the door? Is she alone? Does she wait for you?

The door opens under your hand. The bed is empty, the sheets rumpled, the bedspread on the floor. The room smells of tears. A praying Care Bear nightlight burns in the socket. Baby dolls are strewn everywhere, knocked off shelves and

the dresser. Dolls, stuffed animals from dog to cat to lion to giraffe, Barbies, Captain America, a dragon, a T-Rex, a Minotaur. A dollhouse lies on its side, dolls and doll furniture and doll toys disgorged. Through your feet you feel the wild galloping of a heart giving itself away. From beneath the bed a small bare foot pokes out, toenails painted green. You would speak if you could. You lay your walking stick on the bed. You grab the foot's ankle and it jerks back but you are strong. As you pull the other foot emerges, kicking, flailing, but you hold tight and deflect kicks with your nub and drag her from under the bed, a full-grown, bare-legged woman, hands tied behind her back, gagged with a scarf, the green scarf she wore to match the green dress she wears and the toenails she painted, the dress ripped across her abdomen revealing black lace underwear. She tries to kick you in the face, but in so doing she looks at your face and screams you imagine from her gaping eyes and the appalled furrows of her forehead. She is perhaps still screaming you realize as the scream smell, muffled by the gag, spreads. There was tear smell but no scream smell until you touched her. You hold her by the ankle but she draws the rest of her body as far away from you as possible, pressing her back into a corner, pressing her eyes closed, pressing her fingernails into her wrists behind her back. Her breaths are shallow and rapid, her chest rising and falling like a bird's. Twitching. Eyes closed as if that could make you not exist. You cannot hear her, but she exists. Her fear of you is infuriating; you have not done this to her. You only seek a scream.

You pull her close and reach for her scarf with your nub to pry it from her mouth but she kicks and writhes and head-butts you in the eye. You release her ankle and shove her away and stand over her. Tears stream down her face behind her red hair but though she twitches she no longer screams, her mouth closed around the gag. She could be emitting a low moan. There is a low vibration in the room. You spread your dark cloak on the bed and roll up your black sleeves, one with your hand, the other with your mouth. Her skin is milky beneath the green. She quakes in the corner through 101 while you decide what to do about her.

99.

-- There you are, ma'am. You cops are much more amenable since you were privatized.

-- Okay, so far you've purchased the Private Eye Package: phone calls to Mother, Undercover Prostitute, and an Expedited Scream Investigation: "The expedition we take so you don't have to!" Would you care for a pizza with that?

-- Yes, ma'am.

-- What toppings?

-- You choose.

-- Very well, we know what you like. You-know-who will deliver it. As an add-on, would you like to be considered a suspect, sir?

-- No, thank you.

-- Then may I suggest the innocence fee? It's an annual fee for the maintenance of your innocence, which is known to deteriorate over time.

-- Yes, fine, you already have my number. Use it as you see fit. I'm in your debt.

-- Excellent, sir. The private eyes will be over sometime to begin the investigation, but don't worry, you don't have to do anything, you won't even know they're there. You will not be disturbed in any way. Everything will be taken care of. We'll follow the law to a T, rest assured, and once we reach the T sir, relax, we'll turn right and left until we find your scream sir, no need to get up, we'll be everywhere at once apprehending your scream and documenting its transgressions and theorizing its motives, don't doubt your decision to pay us to do your duty, we'll let your mother know where you are and that you're doing well and that you're happy and that you might be married and she might have grandchildren, be content, but we won't mention your other predilections, enjoy yourself, and if your dalliance or character flaw or neglect or flight of fancy comes up in court you'll be content to have chosen our innocence maintenance fee way back when. We will silence your scream, sir. You need not worry that you do right by your existence or anyone else's when you shop with us, sir. Shut the book on choice making, close your eyes, sweet dreams, we'll take care of everything. Goodbye and breathe easy and be content. Your scream is safe with us.

100.

Resting its base on the desk, you tap the cigar cutter gently with the hammer and cut off your right pinky below the second knuckle. You're surprised you don't cry out. You're surprised how little it hurts. You're surprised how little your pinky looks in your hand when you hold it up to the reading light. You're not surprised you cut off your pinky. A pinky is a small thing, an almost nothing, a thing you're willing to sacrifice to coerce the scream's truth from yourself.

Go to where you were, +1.

101.

If you can wrench the gag off the woman in the green dress, perhaps you can extricate her scream and be satisfied for a short time. But is that the scream you seek? The one in fear of you? You are tired of being the impetus, the reason, for

screams. You remember a time when you sought to be a witness, to capture a deviant scream and consume it, to cease it. The woman in the green dress expects you to rape her, maybe to mutilate her, perhaps to kill her. If she screams that scream, if she screams in fear of you doing those acts to her even if you do not do them, does that make you the man who assaults her? Will you have to assault her to remove the gag, to free her from her bindings? If you don't free her, and instead leave her here, do you become the man who bound her, an accomplice to whoever will come after and assault her? Was she waiting for you? You could ungag her and untie her with physical coercion and if you did not hold her she would run and tell the neighbors, the police, the world what you were about to do to her, and you could not argue, you cannot speak, and you would not hear what she said. Would she be wrong? Maybe you should turn around and leave without releasing her or her scream that you will not be able to hear and excuse yourself and thereby not become the assailant, if you are not already. But who prepared her, and was it for you? Is there an other that expects you to rape her? Who is it and why? To elicit a scream? You have elicited countless screams. Did this other think that would be the scream you seek? The one he seeks? You are already a monster. What you do with the woman in the green dress or for the woman in the green dress or to the woman in the green dress won't change who you are and become, will it? Was she prepared for you, or for himself? Perhaps he stepped out of the room at your entrance into the house in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps he hides from you. Once you go, will he return and do what she fears? And if he does, are you not complicit? Perhaps she has instead been abandoned to die. Will her husband ever return to find her, abused or unabused, dead or alive? Is her husband if she has one, dead or alive? Was it her husband who bound her and ripped her green dress? Is this their sex game, and you are the intruder, and her fear is solely fear of you who are not her husband, and by being present you are the assaulter?

What you do not want is for the truth to become that you are the other, the one who bound her, gagged her, assaulted her. But do you want that more than for her to not be assaulted? Is this a choice between saving yourself or saving the woman in the green dress? You could hunt down the other, and then return with him to prove to her you are not him when you free her. But will she be here when you return, will this room remain here? By being a witness, aren't you already an accomplice? If you would not have happened upon the house, you would never have known the woman in the green dress was under assault, and so would she have been? Perhaps the longer you stand here, witnessing, doing nothing to abet her predicament, the more you participate, and the more the other you become. Perhaps you are the other already. You have not freed her, so you

may as well have bound her. You have not captured her assailant, so you assail her. You have not left her and her lover to their devices, so you invade. You have not left, so you still loom over her. You have not ceased witnessing; you create something to witness.

Why aren't the sobs she spends into her scarf while you persevere and rub your socket with your nub enough to sate your craving for the scream? In the fetal position, or in the tuck, or in a ball in the corner, hiding her eyes, hands tied behind her back with green stockings, she trembles as if a tornado strains to spin the house airborne, as if an earthquake rends the foundation, as if a natural disaster is about to lay hands on her. There must be so little of her left to scream. Before the woman in the green dress is no longer capable, either stay at 103 or go at 105.

102.

A perplexed parent, you hammer shut the cigar cutter as fast as possible to get it over with, to get something done for once, to finish a necessary if regrettable castigation and return to living life to its fullest, or to reading, or to whatever you were doing before the scream disturbed your consciousness. At the same time, as is your bifurcated nature, you hammer as a contest with yourself in an attempt to make a rote task engaging: In how few blows can you cut off your right ring finger? Skilled carpenters drive nails in a single blow. Can you lop off your finger in a single blow? Yes, you can. You do. You gasp. It's gone before you know it, right where a ring would be if you wore one, which you do not, especially now. You will never be engaged again. Or be promised or be best friends forever or be divorcing, whatever a ring on the right ring finger is capable of in your worldview. The volume of blood dripping onto your business papers approximately doubles. Cool air moves over your stumps if you blow on them like a smoking double-barreled shotgun. Your finger rolls off the desk like a pen and thuds quietly on the floor like a cottage fry dabbed with ketchup.

Return to where you were, +1.

103.

You hook the hooked end of your stick under the green stockings binding her hands behind her back and pull her away from the corner, maintaining tension up and back on her wrists and arms, forcing her face down as she scrabbles backward on her knees. The pain nullifies her will to fight. When she is beneath you, you lower yourself, dropping your stick and holding her thighs closed tight between your legs so she cannot flail. You fumble at the green knot at the back of her head with your hand and your mouth. She flings her head back at you,

breaking your nose and bloodying her scalp on your teeth. A burst of white pain in your face, red blood in her red hair. You slip your nub between her hands and pull up on the binding and force her face to the floor and climb atop her and press your chest into her back and give her your weight, still holding her legs closed to protect yourself. She smells of sweat and shampoo and skin and surrender. Your teeth and your hand again work on the back of her neck. Blood from your nose mingles with hers from her scalp, the mixture soaking into the green synthetic sheer scarf and her red hair caught in the knot, the knot wet between your tugging teeth and twisting fingers. You work the knot loose. As you drop your hand to the small of her back to work loose her stockings, the scarf falls from her mouth and the almighty scream is unleashed. A scream you cannot hear. A scream that quakes the house. A scream that freezes you but shatters the windows. A scream that gags you with offal. You reflexively close your eye and press your hand to it because your eyeball might explode like a mine and kill her. While you are immobilized, the woman in the green dress scrambles out from under you, teeters onto her feet, and runs. You open your throbbing eye but don't see her. Her hands must still be tied behind her back with her green stockings. You grab your stick and cloak and chase after her out of the bedroom, down the hall, down the stairs, but you cannot see her or smell her and as you reach the living room you cease to feel her footsteps or her beating heart. Cold air pours in through the open front door. You go to the doorway, suspecting the snow has deadened her footfall but also slowed her. You have no choice but to catch her. You've chased her out into the cold insufficiently clad, without her scarf, her stockings around her wrists, screamed ragged, ill-used by the other and perhaps by you for a scream, a scream you got, a scream that made you limp and allowed her to escape before you could free her. The scream that did not make you whole and complete or end your consciousness and thus was not the scream you sought. How long can she survive bound and disrobed in the cold winter night? There are no tracks in the snow, neither those of her fleeing nor those of you approaching. No drops of blood. No touch of green. The night is pristine. The world outside the house in the middle of nowhere is untrammeled. Where?!, you scream, but you have no words and cannot imagine the sound you make, a guttural howl, an infernal roar, a monstrous whimper, an eagle's screech for a lost chick pushed from the nest. The snow swallows your wretched call before it can catch her, the one whom you unleashed onto the world, no, the one on whom you've unleashed the world, without shelter, without freeing her from her stockings, with only a spent voice as protection. You will abandon this house in the middle of nowhere to pursue the woman in the green dress through the white unblemished snow. You will free her. You are wrapping your cloak around you

when you feel the high whine of opening behind you and then the slam of shutting. Light slips through the cracks around a door in the foyer that you rip open onto a descending staircase you descend into 108.

104.

You close the cigar cutter slowly, lovingly, longingly, like an unending goodbye. The pain lingers, the finger doesn't leave, it leaves an ache. You try to stifle a sob but cannot. You cannot say Fuck You with words because you cannot breathe properly, and you cannot say Fuck You with gesture because you now lack a right middle finger and you are not left-handed. The ache comes hard and slow. You act like you're smoking your middle finger, waving the bloody cigar cutter ironically. You get it, your middle finger is a cigar, but you cannot breathe and are not amused. With the digits that remain on your right hand, you can gesture shooting a finger pistol or Shhh or Come Hither with a finger curl or Loser with an L on the forehead or Zero or Bon Appétit or a signed No. Breathless and therefore speechless, you try the entirety of your forefinger and thumb lexicon. The gestures flutter, fibrillate, smear your forehead and mouth. Amused, you take hold of your right hand and slip the cigar cutter over your index finger unironically. You wait for your breathing to deepen, for your communication to become effective, for your thoughts to cohere, for you to become accustomed to the pain. It may take a while, but eventually your breathing slows, your hand lies still, and though your mind palpitates it does not convulse.

Go to where you were, +1.

105.

So as not to alarm her, you put your cloak back on slowly. There is no rush. You think she isn't making a sound. Her body is limp, not rigid as with a scream. But she could be whimpering, or saying No over and over softly without being able to form the N due to the gag. You take your stick and go, leaving her and her frenetic heart bound in the corner, freeing her of you. You will not further torment the woman in the green dress with your presence, except in memory. You step out of the room, your head humming with what you suspect is your mental construct of her silent scream. Two doors on the right of the hall and two doors on the left of the hall slam shut, shaking the house. Is one of them your desecrating other? The woman in the green dress's husband? Voyeurs, audience members, other atrocities? You don't want to know, you don't want to be involved, you don't want to be used by another to strike fear into the hearts of whoever is behind these doors. You are not a torture device. You don't want

whatever is behind these doors to exist. You would rather the woman in the green dress not exist than live tied and terrified. You know you cannot hear her behind you in the room but you feel like you can. Why are you exposing yourself to such degradations? Why continue to comply like a microprocessor and incur guilt like lead sinkers and witness like a giant lidless eye? Why do you need the scream? You are racked by silent screams and you don't know which are within your head and which without. Which are real and which imagined. Which preventable and which inevitable. You know she yet shudders behind the bed because of you and you must get out of this house. You maintain control down the stairs despite being followed by your thunderous footsteps. The coffin on the dining room table in the living room now blocks the front door. You cannot look at the dead child again and you have to get away from the sounds you cannot hear skittering on the back of your neck and you stalk through the living room, avoiding the kitchen where you smell cooking, to the back door, which you open onto a wall of snow from doorjamb to lintel. White. Cold pours in. In the kitchen lit by dozens of flickering candles you look for another option and see an old thin man with thin white hair and face skin so thin you can see through it drinking a flute of champagne and dropping a lobster that sends high frequency compressions through the air into a steaming pot, a green zucchini as big as a thigh hanging from a butcher's hook in a white window, a crab as big as a dinner plate on the counter next to its detached carapace holding one of its eyes in its claw looking at you, a basket of dirty purple and red and yellow potatoes and pigs feet and twisted red and bent orange and crooked yellow carrots and cow tongue and hairy forearm-long yellow white parsnips and dead pigeons and wrists of white green fennel and dark red horse steaks in the sink, fingers sizzling with shallots in lard in a frying pan. You back out regretting your nose and your good eye and go back through the living room thinking you could smash your nose with your staff to stop the smelling and blind yourself with your nub to prevent seeing the baby before moving the coffin on the dining room table to get at the front door but first you feel the boom of footfalls descending stairs. Light leaks from around a door in the foyer, the last door remaining for you. You open it and descend to 108 to escape what you've witnessed and participated in and averted your eye from, the silent black and the loud green and the wall of white, the wretch of flesh, to escape your hunger nursed on a thin broth of silent screams, to escape this house.

106.

You almost scream but sob once and choke it down. You can no longer write, awkwardly or not. Your left hand has always been useless. For a short time you

will be able to drizzle blood from your right hand in the shape of words, but that is more painting than writing. You have only a thumb, opposable, if opposed by nothing; you're yet human. But you cannot point, indicate, pull a trigger, finger your wife if you have one, though thumbing her is a possibility, tickle your children if you have them, or manage a spoon. Your four nubs burn hot. Even the painless moment of the cut is lost to you because the previous cuts fill it with pain. Your thumb too burns, premeditating the pain because you don't know the answer, is there a question?, there's no hope for it, and that's fine, it's useless to you now without the other digits. You have an identity, missing the fingers of your dominant hand, you are you. Not missing but in your lap or on the desk or under the chair. Independent of you. Spawned and sent out into the world to live their own lives and do good. No, you know they're dead. You stare into the light and try to give it your despair, your lack of hope, your tears, but they stick to your face, they're insoluble in light. You mourn for your future because you have nothing left to say and you are demanding that you say and enforcing the penalties for not saying. You pull your thumb through the cigar cutter with the pliers. You breathe deeply and distance yourself from your temper and exhale your anger and fear and frustration and ignore your ignorant inability to answer and disabuse yourself of your ineptitude and shallow reasoning and lack of fortitude. You promise to not scream. You are sorry, but without an answer to the question, you don't know why your thumb continues to exist.

You give you one more chance at 191.

107.

You can't stand up straight in the pizza parlor, Enenenen's house, in the waiting area with nowhere to wait, crowned in a hanging light with a green shade and tassels, flooded with the aroma of baking pizza, before a counter behind which is a door shrouded in beads. Your stomach grumbles. You ring the service bell. Nothing. You ring. A woman yells, Wait. You wait. From the back a calamity of squawking and cutlery clashing and pots and pans clangling to the ground and a single resounding, Fuck. You ring. The beads are parted and from the pizza parlor's nethers calmly steps a bald young woman of astonishingly fair complexion. Or your astonishment is due to the contrast between the dusting of flour and cornmeal on her skin and the splattering of blood on her hands and cleaver. She undeniably wears a black deeply V-necked shirt corset-tight and who knows what below the waist; you can't see below the counter, though you can imagine no underwear. A gold lamé jacket hangs on a hook by the bead curtain. She has a stud in her lip, you a fishhook in yours.

-- What?, she says.

-- Excuse me, you say.
-- What you want?
-- What's your name?
-- What's yours?

You say your name.

She cocks her hip above the edge of the counter, revealing a nametag pinned to no skirt to speak of:

-- Andromeda?

-- You can read. Must not be as wooly inside as out. Call me Andromeda or Androgenous or Andro or Andy or Meda or Dada or Me or A-da or D-d or Ah-ah or Viola if you ever got cause to use my name. Which you don't. Used to be into beauty pageants but that was all Mom and I am not a whore but it explains the name issue. I man the police station and make pizzas, two shit jobs if you're counting. Deliver too, but I don't mind delivering. Come on, got a headless chicken running around the prep table in the interrogation room, some gamer who hasn't left his mom's basement in three-and-a-half years texted an order for chicken pesto pizza, had to leave off grinding sausage. No more intro, ain't got all night. Order or disappear.

-- What pizza would you like to make?

-- I don't like pizza. I don't like making pizza. I don't like dumb questions. But I'd rather make pizza than man the counter. What's your fucking order?

-- What're my choices?

-- Shut up. Everything. Listing your choices won't help you decide. Hence, no menu.

-- I can't choose if --

-- Shut up: thick, thin, hand-tossed, stuffed, square, round, deep dish, Chicago style, St. Louis style, New York style, Naples style, crispy, soggy, burnt, frozen, to name a few. Pesto, white sauce, red sauce, no sauce. Sausage, pepperoni, Canadian bacon, bacon, ham, ground beef, New York strip steak, anchovies, mussels, shrimp, chicken, duck, goose, partridge, pheasant, pigeon, dove, seagull, lamb, veal. Vegetarian without meat, lactose intolerant or vegan without cheese, celiac without crust served in a bowl. Mushroom, green red yellow orange hot peppers, onions, shallots, garlic, leeks, tomatoes, spinach, portabellas, kale, broccoli, pineapple, zucchini, fresh tomatoes, asparagus spears, mozzarella balls, shredded cheddar, Monterey jack, provolone, feta, parmesan, romano, pea shoots, watercress, glacier lilies --

-- I heard a scream.

-- I don't do screams. Order a scream next door.

-- Did you hear it?

-- Do I need my police hat? Are you reporting your scream?

-- I may already have. I'm inquiring as to if you have any information that will help me ascertain the whereabouts of the screamer, the person, place, or thing, the noun or verb, the part of a sentence that caused the scream, or the scream itself.

-- Have you considered, she says as her translucent or ivory or luminous or bleached skin flushes, the possibility that there was no scream until you called it a scream, nothing before you strapped your word onto it, no it before you forced your perception into it, be it noun: A scream; or verb: You scream a scream; or adverb: You screamily scream a scream; or adjective: You screamily scream a screamy scream and are about to make me scream a screaming red scream; or whatever, you're making me screamy, and therefore you caused the scream, you are the screamer, and you possess the scream; it's in your head or on blowy slips of paper or trapped in a mobile device or god forbid within a journal or more likely in your transient status updates or wherever you record your insignificant thoughts.

-- Yes, you say after a moment or two of thought, I have considered that the scream is my spawn. And the notion that it's all in my head or even someone else's is pretty much a motivation killer. I'm a poor solipsist. There is a world beyond me, and the world will be here when I'm dead, and while I'm in it I intend to better it even if it is by exterminating my own spawn. Have you heard it?

-- I've half a mind to handcuff you for impersonating me, me as police detective not pizza girl, but I don't do foreplay and the prison I contract with just raised the rate I pay per head to house convicts before your mother sentences them. Post-sentencing rates also increased, and they aren't ordering more pizzas to soften the higher costs. I'm stranded on this economic island, indentured in a dollhouse, never getting out except for deliveries, underemployed and overworked and they're economically raping me and that is not a verb I use lightly, I won beauty pageants. I have tears tattooed down my torso that reemerge at my left inner thigh to wrap around my left leg and the price of produce is going up and there's a worldwide wheat shortage due to the increase in volatile weather and rising oceans and widespread drought and my real wage is less than my grandparents' and the fucking white dog gods are taking away coverage for my contraception and do you want to see me as a mother? I've broken the cycle of unwed teenage mother begetting unwed teenage mother begetting unwed teenage mother, but I could start it again. I have no profit margin or belief in salvation or prospects for personal happiness except to listen to the neverending crash of media waves breaking against the rock on which I'm

perched until I die.

-- So you haven't heard the scream?

-- I hear screams one after the other and all at once, screams of seagulls, screams of girls devoured on the verge of womanhood, screams of men serviced by your mother, screams of me at sexual-assault-minded customers, screams of the silent destitute and silenced desperate, screams of children who can't swim splashing in the shallows. Don't fuck with me about your ultimate scream like other people don't have their own screams to perpetuate and slaughter and cower from and live and scream.

-- You have no evidence then?

-- I am the evidence, you hunchback brick fucker.

-- Would you like to share a pizza with me?

-- This is a business establishment, not a pleasure dome.

-- I'll order takeout. I can't stand up in here anyway. Back's starting to hurt.

-- Do you have money?

-- Do you?

-- This is an office of law enforcement. If you can't pay, get lost.

-- I'll render you a service instead. For you I'll beat the world off with my walking stick. I'll slay the monster who devours you, the god who stranded you on this desolate rock, the people including the corporations that make unseemly profits on both your preventative and restorative care, the narrative that has convinced you that you, a full grown woman of confident and unorthodox beauty, must work this job, any job, and act as is expected of you, and subvert yourself to economy, and be a cog in the system. I will silence your screams.

-- No you won't. Cash money. Or check or credit. Gold, precious metals, or jewels. Some tangible metaphor for money. Not tulips.

You pull the knobby top off your walking stick, unsheathing your shiny blade, which snags on the tasseled green shade and sets the light swaying, revealing your monster-slaying prowess. She whistles.

-- Something about you inspires my sympathy, you say.

-- I don't want your sympathy, she shrugs.

The headless chicken runs out through the beads and collapses at her feet behind the counter. She lays down the cleaver. She cocks her head and stares down at the decapitated hen past what she told you were tattooed tears coiling around her left leg. The beads bestill themselves. You gaze at her downturned, glacier fed alpine lake blue eyes and try to turn them to yours by willpower, by telekinetic powers, by your narrative powers, but you are weak in all these powers. Your stomach growls.

-- I should go, you say. You are beautiful. But you have a dead chicken at

your feet with rigor mortis setting in and I've chosen to chase a scream.

-- Wait, she says. I'll send you with a personal sausage pizza that I'll pay for out of my own pocket with the spare change I was gonna buy a Colt 45 Double Malt with and drink on my OSHA 15-minute break. If you let me put my stud in your lip.

-- Okay.

You don't have to lean over much; you're already hunched. You rest your elbows on the counter. She takes the barbed end of the fishhook sticking out of your lip between her thumb and forefinger and tugs, a gentle pull on lower lip before it gives and she turns the hook as the curve passes through you and the shaft slips out. You feel a slight ache and a drop in pressure.

-- Just a drop of blood, she whispers or purrs or coos or snarls or murmurs under her breath.

She spreads her feet and braces herself. She leans in and puts her bottom lip to yours and pushes softly but steadily without making eye contact. There isn't room for her purple -- amethyst? -- stud. It stings and you twinge and grimace and perhaps gasp but that only intensifies the stinging due to the movement and increased tension in the lip. It will be easier if you relax. You must relinquish the space if you want the pizza. It's not about the pizza, is it? If you want her inside you. Do you? You meditate on her cleavage, on the cleft where you now perceive tiny inked teardrops descending from her neck. In the black tears needled into her snowy skin you find a kind of peace, a separation from the pain of your entered lip, a way to avoid screaming. Your mouth relaxes and she penetrates deeper, but your body is still its own and at a certain scrape you involuntarily grimace again, tightening your lip around the hole, spreading the hole just enough, admitting her completely, the tip of her stud projecting through your hole into your mouth. She lets it lie there. You share heavy, trembling breath. Neither of you move, but there is a vibration at your joined lips. Saliva from your mouths seeps into the filled hole. Do you want it to continue or end? She inhales deeply, stops breathing for a few beats, then exhales. She withdraws and won't look at you and turns away and kicks the chicken ahead of her and disappears through the beads. You rub your discarded, evacuated, aching lip. You caress it to see if there is any trace of her. There is none but a spot of your own blood. She reenters, her stud glistening, and places a personal pizza box on the counter. Looking past you, wiping her mouth with a moist towelette, she says,

-- Thank you. Go away now.

Hands numb, accept the pizza payment. Legs weak, cradle the box out the door. Coddling your lip ache, savor the used feeling through the wintry blast of

87.

108.

In the unfinished basement lit by a bare bulb people swarm, frantic, bouncing off each other and the cement walls, screaming. Their unheard collective clamor pummels you. As they race without destination, your heart races; their open mouths open your mouth in sympathy; the wild underground pulse elicits from you some kind of unintentional whine, a high frequency vibration. You see no green dress. Alone in this throbbing human mass, you cross the room through the Brownian motion of bodies in pursuit of an exit, running into people and them running into you, knocking them down and being knocked down and standing again and continuing, protecting your face with your handless arm from their unintentional blows, leading with your stick, until you are funneled into a corner, pressed by the surging crowd into the damp unsealed concrete wall, jostling elbows and knees and open mouths and panic stink pressing you into the right angle. Your brain shakes as the walls shake as the throng shakes. You suspect they are fodder for the sick entertainment upstairs, the masochistic need for a story, the desire for some logical, certifiable, misanthropic, parental-deficiency-induced, psychotic, evil justification of the scream. You have done nothing to stop or obstruct or undermine the scream-causing machinery of the house, and each of them, man, woman, and child, will be fed into its industrial maw and abused, used, made to scream until they lose consciousness or die and are discarded like slag. As one they assume the emergency position along the wall, on their knees, feet pointed to center, heads to the ground, hands clasped behind necks, crowns grazing the wall, as if they're praying to the wall, or what's outside of it, screaming into the floor, which shakes so violently that you too are thrown down into the position, joining them, imploring, Does a tornado approach to kill us or spare us randomly? Will we hear from our children, our mothers, our aunts, our once-upon-a-time friends, our ex-lovers again? Is it a tsunami and did we build too near the unceasing sea? Will our brothers be silenced? Is this the tremor of a nuclear explosion, a meltdown, and we are being irradiated into freaks and our children if we live to have them will have too many or not enough limbs and cancer and learning disabilities and unprecedented allergic reactions and unusual maladjustments? Did we drop the bomb on us? Twice? Are we about to be vaporized, transformed into shadows on walls? Did we kill that many, and ruin that many more? Has the ultimate evil arrived? Is the shaking, the swaying of the bare bulb, caused by our victims' screams? We have all gone to our knees, face down, layered in concentric rings one behind the other, crowns oriented to shaking walls that close in. All scream

in unison, breathe in unison, backs rising and falling in unison, walls and floor flexing with the unified scream, beating in the slow rhythm of scream and inhale, the undulation of screaming through taught mouths and relaxing and slackening and inhaling deeply and screaming again. Old and young, male and female, white and black and brown and yellow and red chanting, monks, holding hands, lined head to toe in all four directions until in the center of the room our feet touch, spokes of a wheel chanting oms at the disaster about to befall us, the grief and suffering and despair about to be inflicted, be it natural or man-made or an act of God. We scream our fear and chant our love and hold each other in defiance and fling our voices at the incipient pain, at the stifling dejection, at the dirty pointless shit fate to which we're sentenced, our sound like a fist-shake, bring it on you loveless coward but we won't go quietly, unleash your calamitous egomania but you will hear us. You want to join them in defiance of something, to love them and perhaps die for it. But you have no voice, and you cannot hear theirs. You are not one of them. Their defiant fearful serene communal scream brings you no comfort. You hunch uncertainly and squirm over them. They quickly fill the space you leave. You stay low to not fall as the floor shakes, as the air vibrates, nearly crawling to a thick heavy wooden door. It is open a crack. Through the crack is darkness. From the crack spills cool air, moist, redolent of mold. In your need to do and your deficiency in brotherhood and your screamlessness you abandon your fellow captives and slink into the darkness of 113 like vermin.

109.

In the initial chamber still or again you vacillate. Are you entering or exiting or passing through? Do you have a head in tow or an eye in hand or a map in your neural network? Are you incarcerated in the Labyrinth in order to expiate your sins? Have you expiated? What sins have you committed? The murder of Medusa? She was no innocent (all the men and perhaps women she certainly fed to her ravenous snakes) though her eternally unrequited love and insatiable need did arouse your empathy. Pangs of remorse for decapitating her drip like Chinese water torture. You want to remove the scarf and gaze at her maggot-proof face her epoch-spanning beauty her never-waning flesh-hardening want. You fight your want. Is your dalliance in this maze parenthetical or essential to your scream chase? Has the scream retreated to these dark recesses gaining strength in a secret chamber resonating off stone walls with ear-splitting terminal vitality feeding on itself or others? Or does it silently lurk or patiently bide or secretly wait dispersed through the Labyrinth until you open the exit door to release yourself and incidentally release it to echo reverberate crescendo and scream to

the world above? In your pursuit have you trapped the scream here in the catacombs and the condition of its captivity is that its pursuer, you, must be captive as well and if you escape back to the living breathing sun-dazzled surface so to will the scream? Should you swallow your desire for escape and entrap yourself in the Labyrinth forever, a martyr for humanity? Where is Atlas and what is relief? Are you alone? If there are others should you try to save them or will that make it worse? Is there something necessary for you to learn to have learned to be learning herein about the scream: information a character trait knowledge an experience without which you will never apprehend let alone comprehend it. Or are you merely a pacifying sacrifice to whatever monster prowls the Labyrinth whatever mans the Labyrinth scream or beast or recluse or demagogue or demon. Have you been guided here? Or have you stumbled into a relic of a trap left by long dead people (a construction once useful now useless) by accident? Or is your current condition inlabyrinthined incarcerated ingested investigating in vivo or in vitro independent or in dependence the result of accumulated choices you've made? The consequence of a single choice? Are you leaving? Will you leave us your voices in the Labyrinth or will we always reside within you? Is the Labyrinth endless passages of unanswerable questions? How do you end them if you do will you get out and is ending them related to how you decide to release yourself from writing the digits of an irrational number and give up on exactitude and precision and release its remainder to the unknown? Will you ever escape? Will you escape now? Of an entrance how do you make an exit? After all you've been through and before all you'll go through you are already out of breath. You cling to the absoluteness of the directions you arbitrarily chose. If you begin facing north with east to your right and west to your left and then turn in the opposite direction, south, east will be in the same direction to your left and the west in the same direction to your right. The salve of directional constancy of you within a world of substance not of your creation of you within an existence that exists irrelative to you of the possibility of you leaving that existence of you as a tool of perception helps you organize your flitting thoughts like a migratory directive. You choose a direction.

If you go east, then writhe forever to 82.

If you go west, then scuttle forever to 62.

If you have freed Atlas and possess the Women of Gray's eye, then congratulations, open the door to 92.

Place the eye in a socket in the middle of the door. Go on. With the door watching you, heave a mighty Atlasan sigh of relief as if you are forevermore freed of all your earthly cares. Make it convincing. Go on. It only works

if you've witnessed and comprehended and internalized the relief of Atlas; you must pass the visual inspection of the door. If you do, through the door you may ascend to the surface world from whence you came. Leave the Labyrinth; decide if your trials have been to any purpose; make of the entrance an exit and come what may. Go on, if you so choose, if you do not wish to live your remaining days in the Labyrinth's hot and cold embrace.

110.

You hear you scream. The severing requires three blows of the hammer, perhaps because the thumb bone is thick, perhaps because you've become timid and empathetic after losing your temper and fingers, perhaps because you are no longer engaged. The thumb is gone. So too are you. You exit into the light. You leave behind your club hand, your inhuman appendage, your monstrous treatment of yourself, your pain. You leave behind your scream and the three reverberating blows of the hammer. You leave behind the you watching you, waiting for an answer.

With a mighty sigh, you tell yourself you have more fingers, five more, and ten toes. But considering your progress, perhaps you should try a different treatment. Don't feel futile, you encourage your absent self, you gleaned some verifiable facts. You've become acquainted with the scream. Your sacrifice has not been pointless. It's just that your attention is drifting.

You'll adapt. You'll become adept with your left hand. Now you're talking to bury your exasperation with yourself, to not acknowledge that you are not listening. Or else you hide behind your words from the looming possibility that you've severed the digits of your right hand for nothing, despite what you say. Were you making up answers to your questions? But why invent when the repercussions were the same for fiction and truth? And if you cannot rely on you, what can you know without doubt?

You've resorted to your tendency to ask a series of porous umbrella questions and shake your fist at the sky when you cannot answer them – the other you isn't even listening for fuck's sake. You do so in response to the approaching dark thundercloud of certainty that you did not acquire an answer, any answer, false or true, invented or real, desperate or assured, to your final question of the noninterrogation.

But you will persevere. You have not failed. You may have nailed down five facts, four at most, and all it cost you was four fingers and a thumb. Now you

need more.

You root until you find all five digits. You give them each a kiss like an amputated lover you're leaving. You open the window and toss them outside, where it has begun to snow. You watch the snow fall. The small hushed sound of it. Cold air pours in. You shut the window, mindful of the gas bill. Your finger nubs have crusted over. You wrap a rubber band around your thumb nub to staunch the last leak. The wool blanket and confusion of papers have sopped up the blood. Not being one who keeps band-aids near at hand, you fashion bandages from post-its and scotch tape them where your fingers and thumb used to be.

Your eyes are open and you stare into the light, silent, absent. Your chest rises and falls, hushed like the snow. You shiver. Under the damp blanket you tuck yourself in up to the chin against the draft you invited. You kiss yourself on the forehead.

After looking upon your unconscious self sweetly tucked in, and appreciating the moment of respite provided by your absence, you continue your quest for the scream's truth at 116.

Falling from your fingers like nail clippings, from your hand like fingers, from your body like an undesirous hand, you seek nothing. As the cessation of desire, as dispassion and detachment, as the absence of pain, as the antithesis of a scream, you drift to 118.

111.

Thank the dicksucking god you ditched those two before they could ask about your hairlessness or compliment your goddamning eyes or make a depressing innuendo about the stud in your lip. You are bald by choice. Some assholes find that erotic and some assholes repulsive. You don't give a fuck about either. Your eyes are blue but sketchy dudes wax them – sky blue, ice blue, glacierfedlake blue, melting iceberg blue, ice-9 blue, winteratnorthlatitudesnorthernsky blue – and your skin's so fair it's almost not there, so what, so fair that when considered with other symptoms such as your desire for solitude and your aversion to exposing yourself in public – that's not what the sparse attire is about, perv – you fear you're allergic to the sun but you don't have health insurance, and if you do the deductible is murder, to get your condition diagnosed and if you're lucky a refillable prescription for painkillers – it hurts to be touched; the probing fingers abrade, fracture, flense your snowwhite skin – because you're a part-time pizza delivery girl, or you were, your last pizza sitting in its bent box on the passenger seat under your gold lamé jacket as you hurtle, an alabaster batoutofhell in a black tank top, a black noskirttospeakof, and no underwear because it'd muddy

the metaphor of the trail of tears tattooed on your windowlike ivory skin beginning as invisible dots on your lower eyelids and microscopic specks on your cheeks that coalesce into visible drops between your breasts and pool in your navel and oxbow around your hip and cascade into your unshorn crotch to filter through your reed-rustling, cypress-butressed, protected riparian area and trickle down your left leg, and twine around thigh and calf, a meandering of ever fatter teardrops, a metaphor you do not elucidate even to yourself because a metaphor is like a joke, punchless if explained, and because you might relive traumatic memories you may have therapeutically forgotten.

You drive youdon'tcarewhattirection as fast as your biodiesel ambulance will go, at first whooping or hollering or screaming to release the hot freedom in your veins, the escape from the suicide life, from delivering pizzas in nowhereville, where your best job prospect let alone opportunity for a sense of accomplishment was to prostitution literally or metaphorically, and from investigating misdemeanors against property and sometimes yes felonies against persons in a town like every other town, which did not pay and which never resulted as far as you could discern in a reduction of offenses or an enhanced quality of life, which you don't define in material possessions or entertainment value.

Having emoted, you become reflective about your incipient adventure, chest-swelling purpose, and augmented possession of life. You feel no remorse for the dude, either of them. Pervert siblings: one of them was unmistakably the guy who ordered the pizza, pretended it wasn't his house and nobody was home, and told you a scream sob story to loosen your sympathies and freeload the pizza and grease the pants you're not wearing, and when the almosttwin brother emerged from the sick-o neighbor's house unsatiated, hungry, bolting from some transgression, he too wanted a piece of your pizza. They're dead. You're gone. No more incessantly aroused, mildly depressed, wanton and wanting men inadvertently but ravenously flaying you. Expressing themselves on you. No more groping to endure, no more self-confidence to mother, no more tears to staunch when you leave them holding an empty sack of your shed skin. No more men.

Before long you are hunched over the wheel struggling to not fall asleep in the mind-searing monotony of the high plains.

You drive until the tank is empty. You pull in behind a McDonald's on a strip of concrete on a scrub plateau, not about to ask permission of this corporation that takes advantage – you are a woman who says what you mean, fuck offense – rapes people daily by feeding them inebriation-flavored ground shit and seducing them with golden arching breasts (or two inviting knees in the air) of

propaganda and selling them the post-modern (post-religious) opiate of material profligacy or excessive sensation and reaping their money handoverfist and forcefeeding (with proprietary seeds) future indoctrination while convincing them they like it. From your supply cache in the back of the ambulance, you pull the hand pump and filter and ten red five-gallon jerry cans. You pump for fucking ever. First into the gas tank. Then into the jerry cans. From the bottomless well of the used oil grease trap. Switching hands, sweating, swearing. Your hairy pits stinking over the stink of overused vegetable oil. But glad you picked up the upright industrial hand pump off Craigslist instead of the cheapplasticpieceofcrap at Lowe's and content to be doing it yourgoddamself and paying nobody nothing and living off their wasteful dregs. You finish.

Famished, you dive into the dumpster. The trash bags have been ripped open by ravens or raccoons or rats, but you scavenge alone. The dumpster is two-thirds full of greasy wrappers, the paper squares that separate frozen burger patties, plastic bags from buns and lettuce and tomatoes, plastic sleeve wads internally slick with soft-serve and ketchup and mustard and mayo, plastic cutlery and creamer containers and lids and straws and ineffable microtrash, bloated cartons of liquid eggs, empty jugs of pickles, dirty diapers, used and unused napkins, half-full cups of Diet Coke and Sprite and Orange Drink, half-eaten burgers and chicken patties (hold the bun) and buns (hold the patty), a long lost McRib barnacled to a corner, holding tight when the dumpster's been emptied for years, paper bags strewn with fries and pickles and soggy lettuce and pale tomato slices soiled with condiment, the gesture of unopened plastic fruit cups past their pull date, incompletely emptied paper ketchup receptacles, not a single reconstituted chicken nugget, only one pie: banana cream (barf), but, yes, Happy Meals and Happy Meals and Happy Meals stripped of their toys but not their food. You are hungry enough to categorize this shit as food. You justify eating it by rebranding it gleaning. If you exercised restraint and got enough exercise and checked your blood pressure regularly and took Lipitor and suffered the increased gas and otherwise leaned into a bourgeois lifestyle, you could live in the dumpster for the rest of your life. But you have somewhere to go. Or you just have to go. You fill your belly. You fill frozen burger patty and frozen chicken patty and frozen fry boxes with the waste of others. You fill your larder. You wipe the grease and ketchup and sticky soda from your sensitive skin with used sanitary wipes. The wind whips across the plains, stealing wrappers and bags and cups and reusing them as tumbleweed and raising goosebumps from your dumpsterdamp skin. You reduce, reuse, recycle, like the wind. You are in love. You live off the fat of the land. Boxes loaded into the back of the ambulance, you turn your back to the wind and McDonald's like it doesn't exist

(it doesn't) and face the sweep of the high dry plains, the swirl of a dervish, the spin of a soaring hawk. You exalt without hair to blow into your face and exhale deeply, trash streaming by you, swallowed by the landscape. The wind scours you. You are ready. You inhale deeply and turn to go and there is Ronald McDonald leering at you. You scream despite your ability to snap his head from his neck with a flick of your wrist, despite how rarely you are caught off guard, despite his clownness. The scream is borne away by the wind. Ronald McDonald jumps. He removes his face and holds it at his side. Underneath he is a greasy, acne'd teenage boy. Sheepish, he apologizes for staring. You say, Watch and learn. He says, I've been looking for a lift to this city I've heard of, Tree City USA, a city of trees and tree houses and hanging bridges and floating platforms where your feet need never touch the ground. You say, You play too many videogames and watch too many movies and read too many books. He says, I know. That's why I want to do something, to go there, to live. You say, Where is this dreamland? He says, Where'd you come from? You say, Town. He says, You're halfway there, a few thousand miles more down the interstate. You say, Well burger flipper, save up and buy a ride and quit your job and go there. He laughs spitefully and says, Save? You are sorry that you, who have experienced what life has to offer, said such a thing. He says, I'll quit my job today, right now, for you. You say, I'm sorry, but I don't believe in imaginary places. I'm flying solo kiddo. Don't quit your job till you have to. Looking for work sucks and jobs are hard to come by, even ones where you suck off the attenuated teats of multinational corporations that put out much less than they take, and most people don't want to live without work, without debt and paychecks, with a minimum of possessions, outside the economy, underground, without address, on the waste of others. But don't quit dreaming. You cringe at your words and hate yourself a little. He says, Where are you going? You say, I don't know, I'm going. He says, I thought you were the one, my Snow White. This endearment unsuspectingly touches you, you who are so sensitive to cliché. Even you were a child once, and no one has ever said such a thing to you, and this teenage boy, this young man, is being unjustifiably honest and open. You consider taking him with you, showing him the ropes of how to live without society and away from people's hypocritical love and the economic machine and without anything but what you can find or make or steal or carry on your back or in your ambulance. But you've foresworn companionship, including manchildren, however downtrodden and disenfranchised and greasy and unattractive and unsullied. You say, I'm nobody, and so is everybody else. Live off their disrespect. Live off their waste. Don't listen to them. Feed off your anger, your disaffection, your apathy, your defiance, your contempt for authority. Disdain my own hypocrisy.

Use me abandoning you to throw two sheets to the wind and say what the fuck, what else is there but to live how you want to live. Do not live in their construct. Be who you want to be. He smiles in a stoic, dignified way unbecoming of a pimply adolescent. He dons his clown face. You hop in your biodiesel ambulance and, unable to peel out for him due to your fastfood plunder, chug out the entrance, a tear trickling from your right eye, and guilt to 83 into the wind that tugs at a yellow and red suit in oversized shoes standing on a patch of cement among the sagebrush on the endless high plains in which you leave Ronald McDonald wronged.

112.

You capture a scream in a box. You write, You capture a scream in a box. You imagine you capture a scream in a box. You do not merely imagine you capture a scream in a box in your head, you capture a scream in a box in the world around you. You capture a scream in a box like Ghostbusters -- the box handheld, so tall by so wide by so deep, the outside of paper or cardboard or if you're fortunate leatherbound, the box stitched together, the inside of the box filled with layer after layer, a hair's breadth thick, of flattened tree pulp or papyrus or stretched skin, the power of the scream taken away by dividing it among these leaves, hundreds and hundreds of leaves like thin cross-sections of a body on display, the scream of the scream divested by describing it in ink veins on the paper leaves, containing, taming, explaining, weakening, labeling, domesticating, the scream in a box. But is it all in the box? Did some characteristic of the scream escape your pages before you closed your box and stitched it shut? Clutching the boxed, foliated scream in your lap, part of you wanting to share your pet scream so full of words, to force your half-legitimized scream on others -- see, it does exist -- part of you wanting to do good for humanity by keeping the confined scream out of circulation, removing the scream from possibility by never opening the box, freeing others from the scream's torment by never easing your clutch on the box, confining the voice, by crushing the throbbing paperweight of a larynx in your lap, by burning the scream box and wiping it from existence before -- but will that destroy the scream or release it? Who will you be without it? You decide, and you decide again and again and again, every moment, whether you are conscious of it or not, what to do with the box within which you've worded and captured and elucidated and narrativized and

given voice to your scream. You capture a scream in a box. You continue to capture a scream in a box. To stop would be to release the scream. You never stop. You capture a scream in a box.

113.

A plump man is duct-taped by his wrists to the arms of and by his ankles to the legs of a wooden chair with glass insulators on its feet. A black hood shrouds his head. In the dark he appears headless. The chair back is against the wall opposite you. He does not strain against the restraints. He shivers. Or his body is carelessly limp. You conclude therefore, before you can sort the menagerie of farmhouse smells, that he does not scream.

Your eye adjusts slowly. The room is small and lined with shelves lined with glass jars. Green beans, tomatoes, beets, carrots, corn, pumpkin, all staring out of jars, colors muted by the preserving and the darkness. Peaches, applesauce, raspberry preserves, pickled pears, plum jelly, blackberries, apple butter, plums, apple-pear-quince sauce, peach jam, pickled peaches, blackberry juice, plum sauce, blackberry preserves. Pears suspended in glass jars. Peach barbecue sauce and plum barbecue sauce. Salsa of tomato and salsa of tomatillo consuming an entire shelf, jars of red and green, spiciness demarcated with stickers of dragon or dove. A crock of bubbling sauerkraut lidded by a crown of mold. Pickles lidded with mold. Pickles lidded with metal lids. Dilly beans. Pickled garlic. A braided garlic vine hung from a joist. Dried popping corn, dried beans, dried peppers, dried tomatoes, dried plums and peaches and pears shriveled in jars. A bin of onions. A sealed barrel of salted meat. A bin of potatoes fragrant with earth and mold. Sacks of root vegetables on the floor hinting of rot yet to be properly stored. Weevils scurrying in a lidless bucket of flour. A wire mesh cage in which are stacked carton upon carton of shat-upon eggs in varying shades of brown and the occasional green.

Another man, gaunt, sits on a tub of lard to the right, turned away from the man strapped to the chair. On the adjacent shelf: a double-barreled shotgun; a heavy equipment battery, wires tightly coiled and terminating in circular electrodes; an axe, head over-sized, chopping block below the shelf; a hammer and a tray of nails; a doctor's unzipped black bag full of vials and syringes and gleaming scalpels straight and curved, small and large; a gas mask connected by a rubber tube to an unlabeled tank; another mask that is also a cage enclosing rodents gnawing on their enclosure; a rope; a bundle of sticks tied with twine; a box of matches; a chrome showerhead without plumbing; and a spoon in an open jar packed with sweet-smelling peaches without a peach missing. The gaunt man holds his forehead in his left hand, but he must not scream, for his mouth is shut

tight, sealed with duct tape, the roll of which he worries in his right hand.

The floor is dirt. The ceiling is beam, joists, and the underside of tongue-and-groove floorboards. In the far upper left corner of the room, slanting between ceiling and wall, is a latched trapdoor presumably opening outside, an entry such as stereotypical farmhouses have for root cellars, around which no light sneaks. The root cellar is the size of walk-in-closets or pantries or bathrooms you have passed through in other homes. If you were to stand you could touch opposite shelves with your outstretched hand and nub. You are on all fours, nearly in the lap of the hooded man, whose lips you now perceive disturb the hood, moving within, mouthing words perhaps -- a prayer or a plea or an explanation or an excuse or a confession or a proclamation of love? -- and who therefore still does not scream. Your right shoulder brushes the backside of the man on the lard barrel and he stands and drives a nail into a shelf post with one swing of a hammer and hangs the roll of tape there.

He stares at each of his items in turn. He touches a few. A package of alcohol wipes in his doctor bag, a packet of conductive jelly twist-tied to an electrode, the valve of the gas tank. He threads a chrome shower arm onto the chrome showerhead, holds it up in the air as if it were installed in the wall, then lays the chrome assembly down. From the depths of the shelf he extricates forceps and a fillet knife, which he lays on his tray of assorted nails ranging from penny to spike. He considers them, wipes his hand across his face, and begins hitting his head against the shelf post, careful to avoid the nail, sending a shudder through the room at each repetition. On your left on the ground a face turns and you feel a long hot breath on your cheek smelling of exhaustion and labor and expiration and production and the strap of leather in its mouth. This thing, this body, which you had dismissed as a sack of forgotten root vegetables or soft apples or otherwise spoiling produce improperly preserved, a bag lifeless but for rot, goes rigid. Her mouth opens around the strap and her breath goes thin and the compression wave strikes your eardrum, jars hammer and anvil and stirrup, drums labyrinth, rattles semi-circular canals, your auditory nerve does not fire, and you go dizzy and collapse face first into the dirt. You the scream-seeker are brought low by an unperceived or unacknowledged or dismissed woman under a burlap sack. Her knees are up and her feet are in stirrups hanging from the joists and she is pushing with all her might and the stench of birth spills across the floor flooding your thoughts -- pickling, sauerkraut, pigs feet, low tide, canning, clams, tideflat, excrement, the ocean -- and no one is there between her legs to catch what she pushes out if she succeeds and you cannot move because of the stench and the scream you cannot hear.

The man with the taped mouth, bleeding from his forehead, picks up a scalpel

and tips back the hooded man's head to expose his flabby neck. Jowls unfold. He rests the blade near the carotid. He sighs through his nose. He withdraws. He pulls up the man's shirt and with the scalpel just depresses the sagging hairless pectoral above the heart without breaking skin, then he pulls back with a slight shake of the head and repeats to the right of the heart, then the left, then below, then the center. He trails a circle around the heart. The blade drifts slowly down the expanse of chest, grazing pale skin over the rise and fall of stomach rolls, scribing a fine winding paper cut. In a valley near the waist the scalpel pauses. The hooded man does not resist. He shivers. The scream persists. You don't know how she has so much breath in her. You know nothing but incapacitation. You are a helpless witness. Spinning away from the hooded man, the man with the taped mouth smacks himself in the head and trembles. He bends over the woman and pulls back her sack and her rags and places the scalpel against her rock hard lower abdomen. She relaxes and inhales and breathes heavily and the air in the room stops quaking and you regain a measure of agency. You lift yourself up on your hands and the man with the taped mouth lurches to his shelf and lays down his scalpel, his hand shaking. He wipes the sweat from his brow.

He picks up the gas mask and uncoils the tube and lifts the hood above the fat man's nose and fits the mask over his still mouthing mouth. He tightens the strap behind his head. The gaunt man grasps the valve. His forearms bulge as he squeezes. He does not turn the handle. In a rush he removes the mask from his man patient and fits it to the pregnant woman but by the time he grips the tank valve and pauses to decide she is screaming again and you are frozen in the trembling air and he runs a hand through his hair as if he cannot think. He strips her of her mask and puts his mouth in it and crouches, both hands over the mask over his face. He throws the mask onto the shelf and stumbles to her with the forceps and gazes into the fetid or fecund abyss between her legs. She goes limp and you collapse and raise yourself again. The gaunt man, dripping, steps over her to clench the fat man's jaw with one hand, forcing his mouth open. He pulls out his tongue with the forceps. The tongue a taught chord quivering as his hand shakes, he reaches for the fillet knife and holds it poised like a violin bow awaiting its moment to play. The knife glints in the meager light -- slipping under the door? through cracks between the floorboards? from the pregnant woman's glow? from your eye, which has compensated for its oneness and your deafness with an augmented, projected perception? from the phosphorescence of peaches and pears and green beans and tomatoes preserved in glass jars? from the glow of pickling sauerkraut? The knife glints. A song is imminent. He contemplates.

The man with the taped mouth shakes his head. He tenderly lays down the

fillet knife and cups the unplumbed chrome showerhead assembly. Releasing the tongue, he uses the forceps as spreaders to pry open the mouth unnaturally wide. He twists and wrenches and forces the showerhead into the mouth sprayface first and lays the forceps on the shelf. The chrome shower arm reaches out of the mouth. He disconnects the tube from the gas mask and the gas tank. He pushes one end over a hose snaking into the recesses of the room. He attempts to push the other end over the shower arm threads but the tube is too big or too small or the exact same size. He drags a bucket of loose fittings from beneath the shelf and kneels before the fat man, pulling out fitting after fitting, male and female, threaded and unthreaded, pipe-threaded and hose-threaded and cross-threaded and unthreaded, rusted and gleaming and stainless steel and brass and copper and flexible and pvc and rubber, adaptors and reducers, straight pipe and couplers and t's and elbows and compression joints, attempting to fit the tube to the showerhead. Tears leak from his eyes. He removes the tube from the hose and throws the tube in the corner and yanks on the hose but it doesn't reach the showerhead's shower arm and perhaps he could move the fat man but would there be another plumbing problem and he is already on the precipice. He pries the chrome showerhead and shower arm assembly from the mouth and replaces it with the end of the shotgun barrel and kneels again, the stock braced on his shoulder, sighting along the barrel, considering the hooded man from the level, his finger on the trigger and off, on and off, when the woman's body goes tight as a violin string and you fall on your face and in your peripheral vision see the end of the shotgun barrel swing to her head. Face down and immobilized you brace mentally for the blast wave. It doesn't come and she relaxes and you look up and he's buried the stock in the bucket of fittings and he is on his tiptoes trying to fit his mouth over the end of the barrel -- you see he has forgotten a stick or means to depress the distant trigger -- but his mouth is taped shut. His mouth is taped shut so he won't scream. Still you don't want to draw attention to yourself in this house brimming with screams, which is why you hesitate long enough to reach out and pull the trigger yourself for him to have time to step back.

He leaves the gun upright in the bucket. He collects himself. He pulls the hood down over the empty, again mouthing mouth. He toggles the battery's jerry-rigged switch to the middle position and uncoils the wires attached to it. Unable to still his hands, it takes him too long to open the packet of conductive jelly. He makes a mess of spreading the jelly on his temples, where he also affixes the electrodes with strips of duct tape. Wires drip from the man with the taped mouth's head. He stares at a blinking green light on the battery, thumb hovering over the switch, waiting for the charge as if it's a homemade

defibrillator. The green light stops and a red light blinks. The gaunt man's thumb twitches but he whirls to the hooded fat man. Did he move? Did he say something moving? He rips the electrodes off his temples with some of his hair and a grimace and a pause to recover. He lunges to the man in the chair, stretching the wires tight, pulling the battery from the shelf, the battery hitting the ground in what must be a calamitous crash, the wires ripping from the battery on impact. She sings again, if more sharply.

You curl up and vomit a little in your mouth and swallow. He drops the hairy electrodes and smacks himself in the face. Battery acid leaks. Without hesitation he leaps up and draws a solution into a syringe through a needle from a vial. Now you think this time is different from the rest of the times whether it's the needle or the resolve in his eyes or the brute aroma of certainty and you want to do something to help her to stop him but she's screaming and you cannot move. With purpose he steps toward her taught, bowed, blaring body and trips over you curled fatally beside her. The syringe bounces off the earthen floor. Splayed face to face with you, he gropes for the syringe wildly. He heaves. He stills. His eyes moisten and blink and smile; he exhales a sweet sigh through his nose into your mouth; he relaxes. She stops vibrating the knife in your gut and the air turns stagnant except for a new smell of a different kind of sauerkraut and the shuddered punctuation of her involuntary sob. The mouth-taped man alongside you rolls onto his back and holds up the syringe, thumb depressed, solution injected, needle buried in a potato. You exhale; he groans and from the low mournful frequency of the groan you suspect the groan would be more than a groan if he hadn't taped his mouth closed. He sits up and pulls back his hand to throw the potato syringe assemblage against the wall and derive some satisfaction from the explosion of the potato and shattering of the syringe and dispersal of the solution -- a bacteria-rich pickling broth? -- but restrains himself. He instead raises it before his twitching eyes like a work of art he doesn't understand and therefore despises and ogles the potato syringe sculpture like he's trying to penetrate its meaning and thereby divest it of substance and threat. Tears form in his eyes, or perhaps the tears were there already.

Her offal smell turns your stomach but the particular trembling frequency of her wordless whisper or high whine or pained hum calls you to her. You squirm against your will. At your movement he sees you, you who were until now perhaps a sack of potatoes or a shadow or a mound of soil under a blanket or the passive specter of death or an empty space to him. He looks into your eye, drops the potato syringe and leaps to his shelves. He turns back to you and points a large scalpel at your eye. You squirm. The hooded man's lips don't stop moving against the hood. The woman's high whine draws you. You squirm. You think

you detect a smile behind the gaunt man's duct tape. He holds up his index finger, lays down the scalpel, and picks up the mask of rats. The mask rollicks in his hands. You squirm. Rats clamber over each other, rat terds spilling out, the smell of rat piss spilling out, and then rats spilling out through a hole they gnawed in a leather strap where the mask was to fit a face, your face. The rats hit the ground and scatter, one scrambling up the hooded man's pants leg, another disappearing in the pregnant woman's rags, another taking a peach slice in its mouth on its way past the open jar to the onion bin, the rest into the dark. You squirm in her quiet wail. The frequency of the hooded mouthing does not change. You reach out your hand and clutch the woman's hand and the gagged cry of maternity gets higher and higher and of greater and greater amplitude until you again find yourself incapacitated face down in the earth and there is nothing for you but vibration, you are the instrument played, the reed the string the membrane the wind, the breath through the trumpet, you are not here, not in your body, you are extruded out her mouth, a sound you cannot hear squeezed from you in sympathy to her scream, a dark compression, breathless oscillation, a dim expansion.

You breathe dirt. She sucks all the air out of the room in one last tremendous gasp and you choke, then she exhales and you gurgle and breathe air. The pressure slowly stabilizes and you don't know if you're sobbing. The mouth-taped man again holds up his index finger and turns to his choices, the tools of his trade. He drags an old wood stove from under the shelves, builds a fire in it with his bundle of sticks, lights it with a match. You lay your head atop her belly rooting for her heat. You want to drink her dry. She is unresponsive. He tosses in two handfuls of coal from a sack of coal and shuts the stove door. Through the empty stovepipe hole the firelight flickers against the ceiling. He picks up the jar of peaches and a spoon and intensely ponders them. The heat increases, the smoke gathers about the ceiling, the pressure rises. You release her hand and crawl deeper into the room, leaving the woman, abandoning her whose skin you want against your face, forsaking her whose embrace you crave, you who have never known unequivocal love, you who have only encountered suffering and discontent and fear and death in pursuit of a scream. She who with you made sound -- a scream? -- filling and emptying, thrumming and silencing, completing and beginning. You who she labored. As the chord between you and her frays you feel her not whimpering, not moving, not screaming, not breathing, going cold, sucking heat from the room, in so doing giving you a few precious moments more as the furnace roars and its heat radiates and its pollution collects and the pressure builds. The man with the taped mouth stares into the middle distance, into nowhere, spoon hovering over peaches. You grasp a shelf on the

opposite side of the room and stand with its support, your bent walking stick tucked under your handless arm, and take a step between the hooded man, sweating profusely, mouth mouthing faster, and a shelf of jarred frog legs, ox tail, and pig's feet. The man with the taped mouth slams down his jar of untouched peaches, syrup splashing, throws two more handfuls of coal on the fire, and grabs the hammer and a 16d x 3 1/2" hot-dipped galvanized box nail. He exchanges the nail for a ring shank. You take a second step and are adjacent to jars of tongues directly below the trapdoor. He sets down the ring shank and grabs a large spike. You gingerly place one foot on the chair between the hooded man's legs and another on a shelf of pickled ginger and assorted ears cow horse pig human dog sheep and teeter in midair gathering your strength in the heat and fumes. He throws the spike into the void and rifles his nail tray, lifting and dropping, common nails and box nails and finish nails and roofing nails and bright nails and galvanized nails and bent nails and straight nails and straightened nails and rusty nails and sharp nails and dull nails and carpet tacks and u-nails, lifting and dropping, rattling the room. You hold your breath. The heat pushes in on your empty eye socket and your nub and your useless eardrums. The smoke makes your eye water. Sweat is pressed from your skin by the pressure. You thrust your hooked staff up against the trapdoor. It doesn't open but a dusting of snow falls in and melts and vaporizes before it touches a surface. The gaunt man picks a bent nail and taps at it on a shelf with the hammer to straighten it until he hits his thumb and stops and grunts, increasing the air pressure. The tape is pushed into his mouth and the hood into the fat man's mouth and ears and nose and the dead mother is deflated, all her internal gasses of rot or mulch or redistribution squeezed out. You must breathe but you must not and the fumes are forcing their way in at your orifices, your weak points, your places of potential failure. You are being compacted, dehydrated, boiled, smoked, canned. In a final act of preservation you again thrust your unwieldy scythe against the trapdoor and it flies open and the pressure blasts out and you cool and inhale and expand and the gaunt man rechooses the ring shank and leaps to grab your foot but you swing yourself up one-handed into the fresh cold low blinding white light of 120. Your perspiration freezes. Beaded, you glitter in the expanse of snow. You look back into that stinking hovel, that hot root cellar, that lightless pressure cooker, to see the man with the taped mouth running his rope between his hands, contemplating it, and you shut your eye and slam the door shut before you see between the quieted legs of the evacuated vagrant madonna or into the mouthing lips of the hooded executed-in-waiting or what else stares out at you from glass jars.

Passing interminably through a slot, a folded five or ten or twenty into a parking lot pay box or a quarter into a parking meter or a plastic card with the signature worn away into the reader or a parking citation under your windshield wiper, you are glad this is all on the level. You don't need another dimension. You refer to elevation or height or the vertical axis in a Cartesian coordinate system, Δz . This is the dimension you do not need to complicate the matter, to keep track of as you try to keep track of where you've been and remember where you're going and map the Labyrinth. It is considerably harder to draw in 3 dimensions than in 2, whether on paper or on your chest, whether or not your chest is made of paper, whether or not you have ink or writing implement besides a blood-dabbed finger. The 1st, 2nd, and 4th dimensions are more than enough for you – time is passing, it cannot be helped, you are changing, aging if nothing else, accelerating and decelerating, if mostly the latter, you hope not the ladder, which would introduce the 3rd dimension, all the time. Forget about time, for though you change in time, your body deteriorating, your brain perhaps expanding as you learn more about the Labyrinth though your learning may merely replace previous learnings as you may have already reached your capacity for comprehension and all future comprehensions will replace old comprehensions like new cells in your body replacing the old, though with a touch less vibrancy at each iteration, don't touch the cancers, your habits and proclivities and thought patterns and emotional ruts perhaps not changing at all, and if your brain were to expand where would it go?, there is no space, and though the outside world presumably changes, again the deterioration, if not humanity's place in it, evolution has long-ceased, as mountains are built and canyons carved and the sun rises and sets and winter begets spring begets summer begets fall begets winter and the condition of the human soul undulates around the same baseline as ever, you pray the Labyrinth does not change in time. To you, that seems a point of the Labyrinth: it's a rock or carved into rock or built of rock, and though rock does erode and crumble and get split by roots and heave to the surface, on average the process takes so long as to not be perceptible by man, rather by you. There is a pattern to the Labyrinth, and it does not change in time, you hope. How many sheets of paper do you have at hand? You have one chest. Forget about time, forget about your eroding body, your ever-shortening window of existence. The Labyrinth is to be depended on. Forget about the multiplicity of worlds – is that the 5th dimension? How many lives do you have to live? Pray for a non-meddling divinity, an invisible hand that won't move the walls or change the conditions of your release as you

proceed. Pray for constancy, that no matter if you are in an uncomfortable situation and have been given an impossible task, that you know what the situation and task are. Pray that if you suffer, your suffering is systematic and not random, pointed and not futile, caused by unchanging definable conditions and not Brownian probability byproducts. Pray you're a decent cartographer, and that the landscape you map as you navigate persists for your lifetime if no more before becoming historical record. Pray that the Labyrinth is a puzzle with a solution, no matter if you will ever solve it, and on the slight chance that you do, or that another you does in their parallel existence you are not privy to and that you pray has no bearing on your own, pray the solution permits your escape. Pray the rules are not changed as you go. You escape from the narrow slot of prayer into an empty, torch lit chamber of 4 stone walls, 3 slots leading off, etc. The unslotted wall reads:

If you turn east, then writhe forever to 90.
If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 30.
If you turn south, then wriggle forever to 62.

115.

In line you march through the crumb-abundant kitchen (you deduce an unseen cat to chase oppress kill the mice, or D-Con to bleed their bellies, or mousetraps in the cupboard along the baseboard behind the refrigerator baited with cheese with peanut butter with raisins snapping their guilty scruffy screamless necks) snaking through half-full cups of milk and half-empty glasses of juice and beer bottles drank to dregs and wine glasses drained but for magenta ponds floating in midair above translucent stems. In the kitchen is the potential for all the versions of you, for all your brothers with whom you march, for all you and yours to swim in wine to bathe in ambrosia to float midair in nectar, to drown together, ants in manna. But you are not an ant, you assert. You use a walking stick and wear wool. You march in lockstep, trying to keep up.

Something doesn't feel right. Maybe it's that you march in a column of ants though you are not an ant. Maybe it's that you want to be an ant and you don't want to be an ant. Maybe it's that you don't want to be an ant but you act like one. Maybe it's that you're falsifying yourself to Viola, the pizza delivery girl, your sidekick, pretending you're not you and this is not your house. Maybe it's that it's still midwinter and no matter how long you march you don't know if it will ever be March, that month that brings spring to the horizon. Maybe it's your insect perception of time, incessantly stuck in the present. Maybe it's that you lack the ant sense of chemical communication with other ants which determines your pathway and decides your reactions and makes of you the protein-rich

motor of a hive mind. Maybe it's that your pheromones are forever piqued and you cannot deviate from Viola before you. Maybe it's that you only have two legs. Maybe it's that you march close enough behind Viola to reach out and hold her hips if you weren't holding your excessively large magnifying glass with both hands not to mention your preposterous staff, which may be fixed to the glass as a handle by your thoughts (the glass does help you see and thereby keep up and stay in line and follow the other ants), or to graze her bottom with your antennae if you had antennae or be her thorax if she were your head or be her abdomen if she were your thorax. Maybe it's that the two of you are an ant. Maybe it's that you are missing the third section of your body, be it head or abdomen. Maybe it's that you're two legs short. Maybe it's that you and Viola and the other ants comprise one collective ant.

Despite not feeling right, you are pulled along by a drumbeat that you feel but don't hear, stepping in rhythm with your fellow ants, each ant placing your foot in the minuscule indentation left by the one before you, marching past the bathroom door, straight back into your house, off the linoleum and onto the generic beige carpet and up and over a nude baby doll into your office, the drumbeat stronger, up a one-legged Spider Man, onto the hilt of a light saber and along its plastic light blade, you marching on the light with a giant magnifying glass now hefted on your back, you dismounting the bridge of light onto the trailing edge of a moist wool blanket and climbing high, climbing onto your easy chair, over the crusty nubs of a fingerless hand, along a forearm and from the elbow onto a desk over mountains of papers, stepping up from one to the other like climbing stairs hewn in stone through forests of bent post-it notes around puddles of foul liquid across a wide pale plateau scratched with lines of black, blue, red, and green intersecting and forming patterns and shapes (diamonds, quadrilaterals, parallels and perpendiculars and arrowheads) and onto a threadbare faded floral print cushion that you climb and into a bramble of matted hair and flaked skin and head grease that coats you as you clamber through, drumbeat pounding, calling you, being you, the drumbeat you ants ahead and behind climb up and under and over a negative pitch of cartilage that flexes under your weight, your feet slipping on wax, your antennae smelling honey, toward a dark hole from which a few hairs sprout, the source of the drumbeat, a hole you must be in, a hole of honey, a hole into which you cannot see through your magnifying glass, a hole within which no light penetrates though you are warmed and invigorated by a sun near-at-hand, a hole of life, a hole teeming with ants, a hole you are in, a hole with no space for more of you, a hole you will force yourself into, with or without the glass, with or without you, with or without dismembering yourself.

You grab you by the leg with your mandibles and yank to make space for you but you kick you in the head and you withdraw and cry and brace yourself to dive back into the scrum but a feeling of violation gives you pause and you pull back from your glass. You are on your auricle, about to penetrate your honey-baited ear, about to rend your flesh to enter your head, in which you are desperate to scrape and tunnel and feed on your sweet gray matter and regurgitate it to make the bed where your seed will hatch and grow and blossom into offspring.

-- You almost went into that trap, she says. Into a blind hole much smaller than you with no visible outlet fucking infested with ants.

-- There is no bottom, you mutter, a labyrinth of endless tunnels, a --

-- You are easily seduced, she says.

-- Are you?

-- No. This comatose tar baby doesn't turn me on like he does you.

-- At least we found our man?, you solve the case with a question.

-- If by man you mean victim and probable screamer, yes.

You sigh like you do after sex.

-- And if by man, she continues, you mean orderer of the pizza.

You are hungry or sleepy or both.

-- But if by man, she does not stop, you mean evildoer, perpetrator, or antagonist, or if you mean checkmate, you have the right to remain silent, the end, then no. We need a suspect. Fortunately there's more evidence in this room than seamen in a port strip club.

You might vomit. Evidence of you is ubiquitous. Indecipherable notes, inscrutable flow charts, nonsensical color-coding, impossible maps. Stirred by your arrival, disturbed post-its without stick fall like snowflakes in a snowglobe. Red and blue and yellow and green body outlines are painted on one wall as if it were the floor and this were a crime scene and the colors marked the location of corpses. Decapitated dolls and dismembered action figures and shipwrecked vessels crunch underfoot, your spawns' debris if you've spawned, or else evidence of the sailors and mermaids, giant squid and sperm whales, sirens and pirates trawling your mind. And there is you, mutilated in your chair, handily unconscious, still warm but of unknown life.

-- What happened?, you inquire.

-- Well unobservant lead inspector who needs me to explain everything, it would appear he was beaten about the head with fists -- note this ring indentation left in his face. He had his ear ripped off by teeth -- note the ragged edge and here, a dental imprint, the topography of a molar. The assailant took his ear deep into his mouth and chewed at the base before tearing off the ear and perhaps

consuming it as I have yet to find the auricle in question or a bloody ear imprint on floor, wall, or paper. The fingers of the victim's right hand were lopped off via the cigar cutter on the desk -- note the absence of fingers and the presence of the bloody cigar cutter on the desk -- and perhaps tossed out the window -- note the incompetently closed window, the wintry draft, the bloody fingerprints on the windowsill -- though substantiation of that conjecture would require further investigation and us to return to the frigid outdoors. He had honey and ants poured into his sole remaining ear -- note your temptation. He suffered Chinese water torture -- note the smooth divot in the middle of his forehead like a depression worn into rock by the drip of aeons. He suffered American water torture, which may have finally been his undoing, though he is still warm and exhibits a feeble pulse -- note the evidence of water boarding: the numerous emptied, foul-smelling receptacles on the end table, his reclined position, the blanket tucked in as a restraint, his yet gaping mouth, his general dampness. The interrogator appears to have not employed a cloth over his nose and mouth -- note the wide spray pattern on desk, floor, walls, ceiling, etc. from when the victim spouted like a whale with all his breath and blew himself into unconsciousness. His eyelids were cut off with a shard of glass and his eyes were made to forever stare into the light -- note his eyes staring deep into the incandescent light from the floor lamp pouring hot and heavy onto his face.

-- Why?, you inquire, feeling sorry for yourself.

-- Are you attempting to slip an existential question into this investigation like roofies into an amaretto sour?

-- I mean why was this done to him?

-- Concern yourself with specifics. The evidence indicates the crime was sufficiently excessive -- note the victim was kept alive to repeatedly endure novel forms of physical, and, we can only speculate, which we your assistant do not do, metaphysical pain -- to be beyond motive, beyond information gathering or truth acquisition, beyond retribution or punishment, beyond experimentation or example-making, beyond the answering of questions, even stupid ones like Why? Try another question.

-- How is he still alive? He must have an admirable tolerance for suffering.

-- Good question. Poor answer. Note the power cord running under the chair and the chug and hum and hiss of a pneumatic pump. Lift the edge of the blanket. Plug your nose if you must. Do it. Lift it with your walking stick to continue to justify its presence. Note the atrophied appendages, the lack of pants, the abundance of ants, the moistness of evacuation, the smell of sauerkraut, homemade sauerkraut like grandma made not with vinegar but enzymes and bacteria. He's been here a long time and whether he is classified as alive or dead

is a matter of semantics. Note the compression cuffs around his calves, filling and tightening with a hum, releasing and loosening with a hiss, slowly pumping his stagnant, coagulating blood through his body though his heart isn't in it. Note the tangled tubes worming from the cuffs to the insinuated pump below the chair. Note the inefficient light bulb keeping him warm. Note the dearth of chest movement, the lack of breath clouding your magnifying glass when I hold it over his mouth, and the absence of an explanation of how his cells acquire oxygen for aerobic cellular respiration.

-- Are you saying he is both alive and dead?

She looks you long in the eye.

-- I'd say note his resemblance to you, but I note that you've already noted it by how you tremble and how you have thus far been useless to me in observation and analysis except as my receptacle. Are you capable of drawing your own conclusions?

She scrapes bloody crust from fingertips into a baggie she pulls from her cleavage. She closes a lid on a jar of amber liquid and tucks it into her no skirt to speak of alongside a vial containing traces of honey and hordes of ants. She collects a bloody glass shard, a hair sample from the victim, a plaster cast of the molar indentation, a scraping from the spew contents on the wall, and post-it notes. She collects fingerprints from the cigar cutter, the lamp switch, a tumbler, and a pen by dusting them with cornmeal from the pizza box, gently blowing it off, briefly admiring through your magnifying glass the fidelity of the pattern of cornmeal that sticks to the deposited fingertip oil, and capturing the pattern on scotch tape. She presses the fingertips yet attached to your body, those of your left hand, into an inkpad and onto a post-it. All into paper or plastic bags stowed in her black bustiere or glass vials tucked into her no skirt to speak of.

You try to assist by examining the papers and notes and scrawls and scribbles and minutiae on your desk through your massive glass, trying to be useful, trying to make sense, trying to piece together a story of what happened to you, trying for coherence but the handwriting is illegible and letters a rem is placed. You wonder if this deadalive man who was or is you had or has mild dyslexia or, and, mediocre claustrophobia because the window is open in the middle of winter admitting snowflakes, or was or is miswired because the cause comes after the effect (aren't you at this very moment torturing to death he ((you)) who has already been tortured to death?), or if the desecration before you is nothing more than the bodily toll of a middling depression -- and the random words rats you can read scream buried in plague those you can't millions of lightyears and commas everywhere, like gnats in summer, like similes like flies on shit, like shit piles in the pasture, evidence, wasteful scatology redolent of inefficient prose,

looping intersecting swirling arrows confounding convergences and divergences and connection and direction. You sweat and shiver. You cling to the possibility that you could make more sense if you unplugged the hidden machine under the chair.

-- Under the smell of sauerkraut, Viola sniffs like a bloodhound, note a whiff of pipe smoke.

She opens a desk drawer and removes a cigar, snips the end with the cigar cutter and lights it with a match. She puffs. She looks at the look on your face.

-- You'd prefer a pipe, she says.

-- I'm a little overwhelmed, you say.

-- Because I smelled a pipe, she says.

-- I, I don't smoke, you deny.

-- I'm not your wife, she says.

-- Because he's both dead and alive, or neither dead nor alive, or --

-- You're a detective, she says.

From a different drawer she removes a pipe and bag of tobacco. She packs it, sticks the pipe in your mouth, punches you in the stomach, and strikes a match over the bowl. You gasp, lighting your pipe. She sets the pizza in the lap of you in the chair.

-- He's paid, I deliver, she says. Let's go upstairs.

The stairs are at the back of your office, the back of the house. She takes your hand and leads you there. After a deep pull she stubs out her cigar on the bottom step. She tugs lightly on your hand.

Looking up the tunnel of stairs, you say without fortitude, I cannot go up there without my walking stick. She shakes her head, a look in her eye of sad compassion or empathetic shame, and goes alone. You return to you in the chair. You unplug the pump. The chug hum hiss ceases. You retrieve your walking stick and sit on the steps and smoke the rest of your pipe and think nothing. Braindead, you wait for your sidekick to return in 89.

Unable to say No to Viola, you leave your pipe to smoke itself out on the bottom step and lug your glass lens after her, dismayed at being unable to look up the stairs without looking up no skirt to speak of, your chug hum hiss fading behind you, up and up. You ascend despite your nausea at what you may find upstairs, your desire to abandon the case, your ache to pull your plug, your need for a hole to crawl into, to 63.

116.

Among the possible vessels of liquid on the end table you find an open jar of blackberry honey. On your finger, the honey tastes good. Creamy, a hint of butter. You tilt your head to the side while ensuring you maintain eye contact with the light. You drizzle the honey into your left ear, the ear with the outer ear you haven't eaten. The outer ear is a useful funnel. The honey poured in your ear appears to not disturb you, catatonic in your Lay-Z-Boy, or only as much as five of your fingers leaving you; you might twitch. From a desk drawer you pull a package of stale chocolate chip cookies and crumble one in an empty pint glass. You take the glass to the front of your narrow house, past the bathroom, through the kitchen, into the living room. You check that the front door is locked. It is. You kick the glassed-in ant farm – perhaps your son's if you have one, perhaps your own if you don't, ants fascinate young and old – to no effect. From a bookshelf you heft a rock – a daughter's pet rock, or part of a son's collection of rocks resembling pistols, or a sentimental rock from your childhood, or a rock you agreed to bring home in remembrance of an adventurous outing with a spouse, suspecting it might be volcanic, or in appreciation of its provocative striations – and hurl it at the ant farm. The glass cracks. From the mantle you elevate a large decorative blown glass bowl – your wife's, you are emphatic, if you have one – all purple and black and crimson with petals opening and fronds unfurling and concavity alluring, and heave it into the ant farm. Glass on glass, art and ant farm shatter. Glass shards and ants and dirt cascade onto the floor. You place your glass of cookie crumbs amid the rubble and wait. You are hungry. You wonder when your pizza will arrive. The ants grade themselves from the dirt and glass shards, climbing up a debris heap and into your glass. When the glass teems with ant upon ant, you carry it back to your office, ants leaping from the glass as you go. You do not attempt to revive yourself; you do not ask a question. You pour ants in your honeyed ear and set the glass down, confident the stray ants will find their way. You wait. Until 123, if not longer.

117.

You descend forever, the head in your scarf bumping behind you, dragging in the dust like a blankie, the staircase turning to stone, the stairs turning a spiral, the stairway turning tighter, narrowing, confining, descending slower and slower as you turn faster and faster about a central axis. Your head bumps against the bottom of the steps you've already descended as your meager linear downward progress no longer provides

sufficient clearance. You hunch. The stone steps are worn concavely. The depressions guide your feet in the dark. Worried that your scarf is not enough protection and that bumping on the stone steps will mutilate the head so it will be unable to turn anything you want turned to stone to stone and thus turn it useless, you hoist the head onto your back and tie several of its dreads around your shoulders and chest and carry it like a backpack or an infant or the hunch of a hunchback where the head is your hunch until the stairway becomes so narrow that you remove the head to descend sideways while leaning back into the steps to fit below the steps pressing down above you, and in a fit of foresight you allow the head to bounce before you at the end of its dread leash, the other end of which you clutch, and now the stairs turn tighter and steepen or perhaps only the depressions deepen and you lean further back into the steps, using your hands to maintain footing, because there is no space, your body is no longer a linear thing but a curve, you lying on your side, scooting down the steps, body curving around the central axis, your feet proceeding you, your head trailing you, your other head proceeding you, your feet out of sight ahead, you unable to see below the waist, your chest confined, getting the cold sweats, from rational claustrophobia, abandoning your walking stick and its no longer secret blade because it does not bend and gets stuck in the tight curves and cannot proceed, abandoning it a choice you will regret from time to time, abandoning it not a choice, your only choice to scoot down or to squirm up, a choice you fear has also become not a choice as your arms are pinned at your sides and gravity aids you in sliding down and around as you wriggle but nothing will aid you in squirming up. You cannot go up. Around and around you go. Down, perhaps. Wondering when you too will be stuck. Wondering if you are stuck. Unable to tell if you are descending incrementally or turning on the level. If you spiral or turn a circle. You are well bent. How many turns or degrees or revolutions ahead of you are your

feet? It is all one long turn. Do the degrees reset to 0 at 360 or continue to accumulate? You consider releasing the head, freeing it to run ahead of you and thud down the stairs, to listen for if it hits bottom in either a splash or an emphatic end thud, to either instill or decimate confidence in a bottom, but what if the head got stuck and what would the sound of the getting stuck be and how would it help to know you would soon be stuck and what if the thuds slowly fade to nothing or instead continue around and around your head with a reduction in intensity so slight at every thud that you are not sure if the thuds are now your invention. You decide the chance of losing your head, your only implement, is too significant. It's not worth it. Despite no freedom of movement you manage to tie a dread around your waist so its connection is not dependent on your strength and endurance and take some solace in the proposition that the scarf is wearing away and that the head will encounter any evil prior to you and turn it to stone. Blocking your impassible passage. The bottom of the stairs above you press down on you, press you down. The turns are too tight. Your body doesn't bend like this and you want to stop descending, you want to stop turning, you want to climb back up and out from this telescoping helix, this funnel, this conch bottleneck in which at any moment you will be inextricably lodged, you want to squirm up and face whatever horror there is to face above, anything is better than being immobilized alive in stone underground without space to do anything but breathe, without space to breathe, without space for your subatomic particles to oscillate between being here and being there, without space for your chords to vibrate and make a scream, stone as your new shell, earth on your back, but you cannot reverse your motion, something pulls you down, yes gravity but a tangible something, a something not unseen, yes unseen, a force besides the gravity you've always known -- the head you tied to your waist by a dread. You descend forever. Or at least turn. You are screwed, bored, drilled around and

down, conforming to the narrowing passage, radially accelerating not because of faster motion but tighter turning, pressure rising, you compressed through a helical nozzle or compacted in a bowel or tamped into an augered posthole or blown into a shell to become the oceanic scream, a last lungful rammed through a constrictor snake of a trachea eating its own tail, a breath squeezed to its highest pitch needing an aperture an orifice a horn an end a throat membranes vibrate and expand and explode and escape and scream of fraught journey and disperse.

You land in a stone-walled space that is not cavernous but feels so after where you've been and inhale. Your head is here. It preceded you. The space is lit by a torch and a door slams shut behind you.

Above the door is a lit red Exit sign. On the door is written:

You have entered where there is no exit. This entrance will not become an exit until you relieve Atlas and retrieve the eye of the Women of Gray. Don't cheat; this door is made of paper and locked with words and hinges on your integrity. No one watches. We can do nothing to prevent you from cheating and departing and ascending now without suffering the Labyrinth or accomplishing your task, but where would you go and that would be like desertion or quitting on a marriage or suicide and you have only yourself to live with if you do so. It is you who must live with your conscience. Go right or left.

You see a slit in the rough hewn stone to the right and one to the left. The thought of entering them makes you want to vomit. You face the wall opposite the door. You try to decide. You realize that since you turned around the original right is now left and left right. You dispense with left and right. You require absolute directions, at least absolute relative to you, fixed in the maze then, so that no matter which way you face if you turn one direction it will always be the same direction and not sometimes its opposite. Of the almost infinite words you could choose as names for the Labyrinth's directions, you settle on the traditional cardinal directions, even though you find it highly unlikely that your labyrinthine cardinal directions correspond to the earthbound, magnetically referenced, human defined cardinal directions. Although, reflecting on how ancient peoples often built their sacred architecture oriented to cardinal directions, you decide it's not out of the question. Although there is no sun here rising in what we call the east and setting in what we call the west to orient

our perceptions, time, and space. Although could not the builders and the explorers and the inhabitants and the readers of the Labyrinth have carried the memory of the sun in their hearts and oriented their architecture in its reverence and even now covet their secret internal perpendicular polarization as representative of their star's path through their heavens, itself a manifestation of a rotation about an axis rotating about an axis. Although are there not other coordinate systems by which to design the architecture that organizes our thoughts. Although you're not looking to reinvent the wheel. You're looking for Atlas and the Women of Gray. You choose the familiar mental construct of the cardinal directions to help you maintain a mental map of where you go, or perhaps a physical one if you are in possession of paper and writing implement and a suspicion of the inpersistence of memory -- you could carve it on your chest if you are in possession of a sharp rock and a suspicion of the persistence of the scarred body and if you remember when you carve that you will be looking at your chest from your own perspective above. A map will help. You won't wander aimlessly, although you must begin thus, not knowing the whereabouts of Atlas or the Women of Gray or the Labyrinth's layout. You are an explorer. A detective an inspector a surveyor. An adventurer. A mapper of new worlds. You suck in your gut, deflate your chest, leave the head tied to your waist by a dread, and prepare for the constrained choice at 109.

118.

You are not here.
You are in the light.
You are in 125.

119.

Flee east on the sidewalk through the gentle snowfall and then scurry south off the sidewalk to the next door on which you do not knock but open and slam shut behind you against the mink and snow leopards and arctic foxes and huskies tailing you, slamming your forehead against Enenen's low lintel, thankful you have no tail to slam in the door. You curse benignly in the dark. A match is struck, the wick of an oil lamp lit, the lamp turned up. The place is a hovel. You stand with proper posture. The ceiling scrapes the crown of your head.

-- Welcome to the Tightest Whorehouse in Your Neighborhood, says your

mother.

You can't argue with your mother; the room in which you stand is uncomfortably tight. The dimensions of the room are smaller than average for living rooms or sitting rooms or family rooms or dens or tearooms or the waiting rooms of whorehouses, and it's cluttered with women reclining in languor on sofas and couches and davenports and divans and daybeds and chaise lounges and floor pillows. The house is old; the furniture is old; the women are old. You are the sole man in the room, but they do not make space on a settee for your patronage. Their eyes are half-closed, eyelids drooping like skin. None cock a hip or hike a skirt or lick a lip to influence your choice. Your mother is older than the other whores, older even than she used to be, as are you.

-- Hi Baby, she says. This is better than a phone call. The matriarchal fishhook is still set I see. What a loving boy, eh girls?

-- Either this place has shrunk or I've grown bigger.

-- Tighter, she corrects, either way. We stay abreast of the screw and bore of time. What can we do for you?

Tails thud headlong and rapid fire and time-delayed into the closed door. The handle wiggles. You lock the door sheepishly. You are thankful, yes again thankful, that there are no windows. Your mother's house, where animal needs come to be gratified, sets you at ease.

-- I'm in search of shelter, succor, refuge, respite, asylum, protection, oblivion, and a scream.

Your mother appraises the whores, their dentures in jars near-at-hand, hearing aids turned down, stockings around ankles, wigs on adjacent false heads, hair exotic shades of purple, pink bathrobes tied and apathetically closed or untied and apathetically open, ancient breasts sagging unsupported. A wall-to-wall mirror lines one wall, making the room feel bigger until you think about it, then making it feel smaller because of the greater number of people, the doubling of women, of you, of possibilities. A mirrored door in the opposite wall is open, exposing a medicine closet stocked with hemorrhoid cream, cushioned toilet seats, yeast infection cream, donut cushions, vaginal suppositories, Metamucil, hair dye, red lipstick, oysters on the half-shell, Icy-Hot, Viagra, garter belts, Lipitor, pictures of grandchildren, multi-vitamins, lost glasses, a pill dispensary gridded into tiny drawers labeled with days of the week and names of the women, and bananas. The lack of condoms or other prophylactics is conspicuous until you reflect. On the television, which no one is watching and which is turned up so loud you cannot hear it, is a documentary on the expressiveness and utility of tails in the animal kingdom.

-- Well son, she concedes, I'm the woman for the job. But it's gonna take me

half-an-hour to physically and mentally prepare myself. And it'll cost you extra for the scream.

-- No, I'm looking for a scream that already happened.

-- You just tell me who you want me to be. Phaedra wanting Hippolytus, Megara under Hercules, Medea slaying her ... Fine, Jocasta, but there'll be an emotional damage surcharge.

-- Too old. I desire a now, young, just-screamed scream. Did you hear one?

-- One? I've heard thousand and thousands of screams, child. I can no longer differentiate them in my memory tonally or temporally. The just-screamed blends with the long-ago-screamed. The scream of corporeal abandon crossfades into the scream of conception melds with the scream of birthing dissolves into the scream of an old man expiring under me. They are all the same scream.

-- Maybe I need the police instead of a whorehouse.

-- As you know, I am the chief of our police as well as the matron of our whorehouse. You made me state what you already knew in order to pout, to sulk, to mope. Chastisement of petulance will also cost extra, be it spanking or the lash of my tongue. As will playing cops and robbers, informant and private eye, or detective and sidekick. As will a scream.

-- I've no money, Mother.

-- Then get out. I don't run a welfare house, I run a pizza, police, and prostitute house.

-- I am hungry. And I can't go back out there, Mom. Those tails are wagging and waiting to devour me and bloody the new snow.

-- Nothing to eat here. Raisins, I suppose. Prunes. Dates. Behind me a not-so-secret passage connects to the pizza parlor next door. But the pizza girl has firm instructions.

-- Her instructions are firm?

-- Very firm.

-- And what are her very firm instructions?

-- To not deliver without being paid.

-- Very firm, then. Goodbye, Mother. And you are certain you have no knowledge of a scream?

As if in answer, a quavering scream rises from the back of the house, a cracked but repaired scream, an antique or distressed or broken down scream refurbished or renovated or rejuvenated. Within the scream you discern your grandfather's name; the screamer is your grandmother, a nonagenarian you decide, and the screamee, a grunter, cannot be your grandfather, who is long dead. You crumple. Your mother reassuringly spreads her legs, revealing a tunnel in the wall, and you crawl between them through the tunnel into 107.

You tie your cloak shut and pull your hood around your stinging face and lean on your harvesting tool. The wind howls or shrieks or roars. These are meaningless words to you. The wind whips. The wind pelts you with snow. You look into the gale for a moment and marvel at the millions of snowflakes flung forward, flying at you, stars zooming by, hurtling into you, until one pierces your eye and crashes into your retina and you turn your back to the wind and your face to the house. Snow builds against its base. The tracks you left as you arrived are obliterated. The trapdoor is buried. It's too cold to be snowing this heavily. The wind lifts the snow from land and hurls it. You spread your arms, make of them uneven wings, one holding out your hooked staff, the other handless, and invite the wind to take you where it will. It doesn't. The wind whips you. It beats you down and you tuck in your wings and again brace yourself with your shepherd's crook. From where you stand, the wind would throw you against the house like a snowball if it lifted you. You no longer want what you want. You ache for a scream but the screams ravage you. It is very cold. But you are incapable of choosing to stay where you stand and subject yourself to a hypothermic death. You cannot step into the wind away from the house. At a step to the side, the wind could strike the proper velocity and generate sufficient lift and make of you an airfoil and smash you against the farmhouse. You imagine, feel the impact: a fly against a windshield or a songbird against a window or a jack-o-lantern against a house or a crash test dummy against a wall or an effigy against a wall or another tiny snowflake shattered against the wall. If you could hear, perhaps the wind would blow the screams away. If you could hear how the wind screams at, on, over, through, in you, perhaps you would be able to give yourself to wind and snow. As it is, the density of screams within the house again draws you toward it. The cumulative pounding of each snowflake impels you toward it. The relentless wind pushes you back toward it. The normal component to the wind exerts a downward, earthward, snowward force on you, on your shoulders, on your back and you stumble, catching yourself with your hoe. You dig your feet in and brace against your walking stick but you slide or else the house approaches you. The distance shrinks. The shrinking accelerates. The wall looms. You struggle sideways, almost lose your footing, see yourself pulverized, body broken, consciousness eradicated, limbs crumpled, need oblivioned against the wall in your mind's eye, plant your spear against the base of the wall, and pole vault into a current swooping around the front of the house. The airstream bends and curls and you with it, your cloak pinned to your back and full of wind, you sailing in an upward swell over the front steps and along the wraparound porch. At the lee corner, you are spun in a vortex, caught in the

drag, dropped in a heap, and deposited in the calm of 131, sheltered from the wind by the house of screams.

121.

Down the oak tree branch by branch bound, tree unbranching to the singular trunk before branching again underground, you on the ground, chasing hairless tail and beady eyes, plague vector, leather chewer, mattress shredder, root cellar disemboweler, shadow, hoarder, stowaway, celebrity scream implement: making a grown man scream in "1984" and a baby scream in "Lady and the Tramp" until the deadbeat dog lucks into heroism and a mother scream in -- you're slowing doing what you said you wouldn't weighing yourself down sullyng the chase with classification motivation verbiage leave the baggage behind -- chase it through brown rustling leaves around the symbolic-of-something pond and under the topiary that could be hands reaching up out of the earth or wings opening or birthing hips but who gives a shit because you're not losing the vermin even if you're not particularly gaining and the rat scoots under the fence and you leap up and over it into your yard where the rat regularly pilfers chicken feed and occasionally an egg that slips immaculately -- surprise! -- from a chicken with a quick squawk outside the coop but he's not stopping to eat now as he dashes between the legs of your East Neighbor's terrier bloodhound who is half-bred to kill rats but who is bellowing at your back door, dumb dog, as if there's some evil therein which he both fears so despairingly and wants to attack so desperately that he doesn't notice the rat but he does you -- you're conspicuous, a wannabe tiger or panther or cougar, your possible stripes yet glowing violently from the blacklight -- and distracted from his watch he joins the chase and is after you after the rat who runs into the chicken run through his hole in the chicken wire and pauses to pilfer food after all -- he can't help it, it's his nature, he craves -- until you screech at him through the chicken wire and the chickens squawk wildly and the dog growls and the rat sneaks under the fence to the north, out of the chicken run off your property not into another backyard but into vacant land, open country, fallow fields, for you have no northern neighbors thank god, nothing but barrenness, or bareness, or simply nothing, except for dirt and dandelions because nothing is not simple and bunch grass and a smattering of trees, either hardwood or softwood, and perhaps somewhere unseen shepherds and ranchers with their tamed beasts and farmers with their domesticated plants, and you leap the fence after the rat into a trammed wilderness you've never broached, you've never climbed over your northern fence, when you peaked through a knothole it struck fear into your heart, the fear of emptiness, loneliness, etc., a fear you don't have the time or willpower to feel now as you

land and explode after the rat and hear the dog thud headlong into the fence behind you and turn around to run through your front yard -- the flea-bitten mutt lacks stealth, you hear his thumping tread and wheezing breath and can locate him on your mental map as you both chase and flee -- back through his yard to his north fence, which has a loose board or fracture or breach or hole in the fenceline which he knows, a portal which he frequents and he bursts through chasing you chasing the rat, a line of trees in the distance darker than the night, an unseen road bending to the left delineated solely by the white headlights of an ambulance flying away at incredible speed, red taillights twinkling, red and white siren lights spinning silently, a drainage ditch to the right where you hear rats screaming with abandon for their brother, cheering him on, you without thought of where you go because the rat decides for you, if he decides at all, if he's not mindlessly chasing the light or darkness or freedom or cheese in his mind, or the continued life or screamless paradise or dark narrow hidden hole or maze of sewer pipes underground in which to lose you and the dog and himself forever, all three of you chasing whatever he chases then, a chase of a chase of a chase of cheese through the unlit winter night into 97.

122.

You find it more and more difficult to pass through the passages. Are you growing larger as your will is worn away, those parts of you that contain you, skin, shell, self-conception, abrading away against the stone so that you swell and expand? You are hungry. You don't know when you last ate. You don't know when you last knew when it was, or when it is. What are the chances there is food? Is there a room baited with cheese in this maze? With pizza? If it's a trap and you die with your mouth on a morsel, fine. You would kill for something to eat. Surely there are insects roaches spiders worms grubs. Ants. Other mice. Others who have come before you. Others collapsed, deceased, of whom you can eat. Undeceased, but weaker than you because they have been unable to eat others lost like them. You don't care. You will not cower before their screams, you will kill to eat, you will be the monster in the Labyrinth. Maybe you already are. Maybe you've been here for years, decades, aeons, forever, and you've already consumed your fellow prisoners' flesh, relieved them of their wandering, their entrapment, and that is why there is no one else. You do feel larger. You do drag a head behind you. You are alone. You are hungry. Ahead a flicker at the end of the tunnel and you push and squirm and scuttle and wriggle and slide and writhe as fast as you can which is not fast but faster than you were, your stomach clenching, your mouth moistening, your tongue licking your teeth, your dread weapon of a head trailing you, pizza filling your nose, your larynx, your lungs.

You explode from your constricting hunger into a room that contains nothing no snap no trap no food but a torch dimly lighting a message on a wall:

If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 90.

If you turn east, then writhe forever to 50.

If you turn south, then wriggle forever to 82.

123.

It's not that you believe ants can chew through your eardrum and tunnel into your brain and feast on your cortex and regurgitate your gray matter and cultivate a unique fungus and lay eggs and anoint a queen and all the rest.

It's that you never answered the fifth question, which casts a doubt on your previous answers, and as of yet you've been unable to fully embrace uncertainty.

It's that if you're the one who invented the scream, you should know the when, who, where, what, and why of it, you fuck.

It's that you've done a lot of hard-earned research on screams, or the requisite amount, enough to pass for an expert or priest or academic among laymen, and you know the scream you screamed when you cut off your thumb was insufficient.

It's that you need a scream that justifies a story, an entire novel, multiple worlds, a shattering and rearranging of personae, an existence.

It's that you need a scream that justifies making all these people scream.

It's that you need a scream that justifies making all these screams.

It's that someone needs to pay for these screams.

It's that someone needs to suffer for the suffering they've created.

It's that someone needs to be sacrificed to appease the god of screams, to oppose the motive force instigating all screams, to bung the void that is the wellspring of screams, be they of pleasure or pain or desperation or joy or grief.

It's that someone made someone scream and someone must be punished for it, as a deterrent if nothing else.

It's that someone needs to scream to stop the screams.

It's that ants in your ear cannot feel good, and could perhaps cause immense pain.

It's that long ago you heard a scream, and you decided you would be a detective.

It's that there is such suffering in the world, in all the worlds.

It's that you hurt so much.

It's that you have chosen to use your hurt as a tool.

It's that there is no one here but you, and you have only the tools at hand: your hurt, your words, your ants. Use them at 133.

124.

-- Wait!, you cry and she freezes, poised to thrust your walking stick through your door like a battering ram.

-- WTF man, she says, are you opposed to all action? Let's see if there's anyone to save, and if not at least we'll know.

-- I have an idea, you say and lift the mat that says welcome and velkommen and bienvenidos and benvinguts and mishto-avian tú and добро пожаловать and marsha vog'iyla and مرحباً and ulihelisdi and خوش آمدید پا and karibuni and and well come in thousands of languages (crouched down with the mud and snow wiped from many boots, though to your knowledge no one has visited your house in forever, you cower at the existence of foreign alphabets (ଓଡ଼ିଆ), at shapes and arrangements of lines to which you don't know how to begin to fit sound, not to mention meaning, at the isolated if overlapping spheres of language and the breadth and development and restriction of thought and the prospect and limitations of communication, at the many worlds inside this one) and pull out the key, Voilá.

-- The name's Viola. Don't ever speak French to me again or I'll have your nuts for hors d'oeuvres. A big stick is a more interesting choice, but go ahead, Detective.

You unlock and open your door and enter your house.

-- Hello?!

You cringe against a response. None comes. No one is there but Viola in no skirt to speak of, one hand on a cocked hip, the other a pizza pedestal, assessing your living room.

-- Tasteful family room, she says.

-- Living room.

-- Den. Note the toy box: children's toys, not dog toys or sex toys unless the owner is disturbingly creative. Note, among the various pieces of phallic and vaginal glass art on the shelves, the pictures of young children. Note my use of the plural.

-- Maybe they're not his.

-- Too many pics of the same kids for them to be a friend's, neighbor's, or relative's.

-- Maybe lacking his own children, he hangs or displays frames, frames containing pictures of children he does not know because he is lonely and he can't resist purchasing frames.

-- Consumerism or an intellectual conceit? Filling holes with more holes.

-- Maybe he collects dolls and broken battery-needing noise-producing brain-liquefying plastic toys as a consumerist critique.

-- Or he's a creep trapped in his own preadolescence. The wife or mother or female figure has been here recently.

-- No she hasn't.

-- Toys are picked up.

-- He's been known to clean.

-- No dust on the vibrant flowering glass art, petals open wide, stamen erect within.

-- Shit, is she home?

-- Although there is this shattered glass we're trampling into the carpet.

-- Shit, has she gone? I'll vacuum if it makes her exist.

-- Note the shattered ant farm, the spilled dirt, the small orgiastic balls of ants, other disenfranchised ants shredding the ficus and marching with its dissected foliage.

-- What ants?

-- Look through this platter-sized convex lens of glass art, Inspector, the original purpose of which is unknown, as a bi-convex platter or bowl would seem content-shedding. Perhaps that itself is the purpose? Use two hands. Don't drop it. You're not the Inspector without a magnifying glass. With it you will be able to inspect the interior of a man through a hair follicle in his ear from which the hair has been plucked and illuminate his intent, read his thoughts, magnify his actions.

-- The ants, they're climbing all over each other, black automaton monsters clambering on each other's backs on tiny honey balls. I-I-I can't see the honey but I can perceive it at center beneath layer upon layer of writhing ants extravagantly consuming their sphere of limited resources and always wanting more and more honey ...

-- The ants were kept in their glass-walled farm for display. Have they broken out? After a signal from their queen, are they finally moving against humanity armed with their formidable weapons of self-sacrifice and collective consciousness and heroic strength. Or have they been released? Was it a shortsighted and vain attempt to bequeath freedom to the ants. Or an act more devious, an attempt to force one's free will and the responsibility that comes with it upon the ants, a foolhardy effort to abdicate awareness by foisting it on the ants' backs? An attempt to become an ant oneself.

-- There's been an intruder, a thief!

-- No. The opposite of an intruder. The opposite of a thief. Besides, there is nothing to steal from an ant farm but ants.

-- A great struggle then, a battle unresolved, entropy increasing, ants and glass and honey everywhere. The picked-up toys are a short-lived victory soon to

deteriorate into disorder.

-- Note the untouched fish tank with its staring clown fish. Note the python in the terrarium under the heat lamp, coiled peacefully. Note the lovebird blessedly silent in its cage under a blanket.

-- Why the ant farm?

-- Shut up Inspector and do not use that word or you will not speak. Forget everything I said. It was either an arbitrary act of violence or the ants acting of their own volition or to steal the ants. Listen to Lao Tzu: when you say a thing, you diminish its veracity. The truth cannot be spoken. Let your words dribble out that possible hole in your lip unspoken. Observe.

You almost respond but manage to keep it down. You observe your menagerie room. You tongue the hole in your lip, unsure how it got there, part of you knows and part of you doesn't, and unsure if it is there, it is both there and not there. There is a couch, books, said ficus. Viola's gleaming pate and what you imagine is no underwear and you wrench your eyes away. A coffee table, on it coffee table books about chickens and gardening and wonders of the world. You've never opened them. They are dusty.

-- Set your pizza down right here and complete your task. Deliver the pizza and let us exit. We should not disturb his privacy. He could be enduring great contemplation or elated absence or a diffusive out of body dispersal or --

-- I'm not delivering the pizza until I get paid and the pizza is not all I'm gonna deliver.

-- She cannot be pregnant again, you scream.

-- If inadequate or failed or non-existent protection was used, or if the protection possessed a certain, if tiny, probability of insufficiency, which is all protection, she can. But what I'm saying is we're gonna deliver humanity from a monster.

You recoil. She turns toward the depths of your house. On the verge of tears, on the verge of adding your tears to those immortalized on her body, on the verge of joining the trail of tears coiling around her leg, verging, verging into the abyss of your house you follow your regal sidekick Viola, joining a single file line of ants with whom you march in step one-by-one into room 115 of your house.

125.

You are not here.

Perhaps you are in 118, or 135, or 141, or 160, or 152, or 110, or 125.

You are everywhere, your consciousness expanding through pain and light and the exalted excitatory vibrations of the scream, expanding through 124 and

126 and 123 and 127 and 122 and 128 and beyond.

But you are not here.

For here there is a pain in your ear eating into your brain, a pain like a hundred scampering feet in your middle ear, more, a multiple of six, one hundred and two or two hundred and ten or three hundred or six hundred or six thousand feet scampering in your inner ear.

A pain like the feet support your weight from within your ear, the feet holding you up on their backs in an Atlassian feat via your bony labyrinth and your swirling cochlea, both of which have tiny load-bearing areas, resulting in an immense pressure on the organs of your inner ear.

A pain like mandibles cutting off chunks of your membranous labyrinth and swallowing and regurgitating and stirring in saliva and laying eggs in the fermenting chunks of flesh.

A pain like white light.

A pain like a community under your skin, like independent entities without self-awareness working in service to a higher consciousness, toward a collective goal, sacrificing themselves for the good, for perpetuation, their goal to consume and regurgitate and dissolve you and make of you one of them, which is what you want, you who want to not want, to dissolve yourself into a higher consciousness, to be a cog in a great machine, a soldier for a queen, a narrative device, a seedbed, fodder, a farm, to be sustenance for others.

A pain like knowing your body somewhere suffers such great pain that it perpetually screams but you are not here to feel it or hear it or be it.

A pain like your scream being sufficiently everpresent that it fades into background noise, unheard.

A pain like wanting your awareness to be a house into which everyone is invited. When the guests arrive and enter and cram into the house you give them the key or drop it down the sewer or leave it under the welcome mat and go.

126.

She bumps the side of the ambulance with her hip, kicks its fender twice, wiggles the driverside mirror, checks the tire pressure on the front passengerside tire, places her foot on the bumper, smacks the hood. The rear doors open. She folds the bench seat into a bed and says, "This doesn't mean anything." You sit. She says, "I got rid of the gurney and the stirrups and the straps and the jellied electrodes. This isn't a freak show." You split the pizza. It's pepperoni pizza. It's good, or filling. You both gorge yourselves. You both lay back, knees up, feet on the floor, staring at the ambulance ceiling with its paintings of glow-in-the-dark skulls and crescent moons and comets crashing into planets and stars gone

supernova and the sun gone dark, cold air pouring over you. You both lay, stuffed, not touching, breathing in unison, silent.

After what might be millennia, she says “I’m bored.” You offer to have sex with her, in search of a scream.

She says, “Why not, what the fuck?” You scooch a couple inches her direction to 56 and she punches the roof and the rear doors close you in total darkness but for the glow from the interstellar ceiling, in total privacy from voyeurs.

She says, “Dude, I don’t even know you.” You suffer on to 58 in awkward silence, telling yourself it’s only sex, unsure whether to press on and try to convince her it’s only sex, what could it hurt, or leave shamefaced and hopefully never see her again, or pretend you are drunk, or continue to lie beside her and convince yourself you’re satisfied in platonic relationships.

127.

- Hello, neighbor.
- Who speaks?
- Your neighbor.
- I have many neighbors. None of them call.
- You are my East Neighbor.
- Ahh, how are you West Neighbor?
- I have a different West Neighbor. I’m in the middle.
- I’m in the middle. We’re all in our own middle. Time and space are relative.

I define you based on your relationship to me. You are my neighbor to the west. Hence, call yourself what you like, but you are my West Neighbor, if not your West Neighbor.

- Well spoken.
- Hell’s broken?
- No –
- If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
- How are you, East Neighbor?
- I asked you that and you didn’t answer.
- Fair enough. It’s a dumb question. Pretend you didn’t hear it. Did you hear a scream?
- No, I don’t fear creams. I rather like them in fact, my wife makes a mean whip –

-- I heard a scream.

-- If you burst a seam, my wife's the one to talk to. Trouble is, she just walked out and I don't know if she's coming back.

-- I'm sorry, but I'd –

-- Well, we're all starry butt-eyed when we're young. As she walked out the door she said something about, If you can't fear me or leer me or smear me or career me or beer me or veer near my rear or steer me, then I'm bleeding. But I couldn't hear her clearly.

-- That's nice, but –

-- She does have a nice butt for her age, but it didn't make sense. She's too old to be bleeding.

-- Did you –

-- Our troubles started with that scream. You hear that?

-- ... Yes. Yes, I heard a scream.

-- If you don't want to tell me, I understand, we're not that close except in proximity. But my wife and I, we were having our typical evening conversation, discussion, argument about whether or not you have a wife and kids, which is typically followed by a disagreement about what we should do with our lives now that our kids have moved out, even though our lives are almost done, and which is often preceded by a debate about if we decided what we would do with our lives before we lived them, if we would get married, for example, and when we would have kids, or if this was decided for us, or left undecided by anyone and anything, all while we have agreeable sex you can probably hear next door. Can you hear it?

-- Yes, often. You scream a lot.

-- Steam pot. I don't know what that means. A sex position? We're too old for sex positions. Do you have a wife and kids?

-- I can't hear you.

-- You already said you can hear me, no need for repetition. Hearing your neighbor is good though. No choice but to acknowledge the other's humanity. Listening is what neighbors are for. We were doing what we do, then a scream came from your house –

-- Not my house.

-- No, not a mouse. So, the scream. Then my wife's lips kept moving, all of them, but they stopped emitting sound.

-- I see.

-- No skin off my nose if you pee while on the phone. I do it all the time. Thus began our troubles, which have continued with my wife leaving and me not knowing when she will return. You get that scream taken care of yet?

-- No. I think I have an ear infection.

-- Fear rejection? Smear dejection? Deer inflection? Weird erection?

-- I'm hearing things.

-- I don't hear anything. Hear screams all the time, my place, your place, East Neighbor's place, cats screwing in the alley, your bloody chickens pushing out eggs, seagulls and crows fighting over the trash overflowing from your West Neighbor's trashcan that hasn't been set out for the trashman for three weeks, my wife screaming at the dog for not pooping in your yard, at me because she's finishing, or because I'm fishing, or because I haven't finished my dinner or my toilet or her or this phone call. There's so much screaming I can't hear it anymore. So much screaming, I wasn't too worried about this one at first. But upon reflection, this scream sounded different. I could hear it, for one thing. Then I could hear nothing, for another thing. So I called the cops. No answer.

-- I hear –

-- You still there?

-- I hear –

-- No need to scream.

-- I hear the ocean crashing in my ear. I hear the throb of my heart. I hear the peeling bell tolling Now Now Now without cease. I hear the scream in my ear. My brain pushes on my eardrum, trying to escape. I hear pain. My ear is pain. My face hurts, my jaw hurts, my ear hurts such that it requires monumental effort and historic endurance to speak. I swirl at the center of a whorl of earache; my ear is underwater whirled by a dervish; twirling I drown in a whirlpool of voices. What infected my ear? This phone? Bacteria? A worm or spider or fly? Your voice? Virulent words? Poignant emotion expressed? Heartrending insight communicated? The manipulative machine of story? A scream? The scream reproduces and multiplies multiplies multiplies in my middle ear, and my body resists, pumping my middle ear full of fluid, trying to drown the bacteria insects voices communications screams, inundating them with leukocytes, monocytes, lymphocytes, granulocytes, macrophages, and my defense system masses against my weak point, the sight of invasion, the chink in my skull, pushing against my eardrum, which is turgid, taught, under such tension that it will not vibrate for you or for me or for them or for anybody and I cannot hear anything even though it sounds like the entire earth if not a sizable chunk of the galaxy spins in my ear while all its inhabitants scream like little Who's with technologically advanced amplification systems. Are you still there? I cannot hear anything, but still the ocean, my heart, the bell, voices, worlds, the scream, and the pain are all there, here, in my ear, where I can't hear, did I say that yet?, I can't remember because I can't hear myself because I can't speak because of the pain from internal lymph

pressure, the turgidity of the drum, stretched to bursting. How much better it will be when it ruptures with a momentous gong like church bells on Easter or Buddhist gongs always and releases the bloody yellow pus and pain and perhaps even the scream in a tsunami trickling from my ear as if my brother poured poison in to kill me and marry my wife, if I have a wife, except I'm pouring this fluid out, or I will be, in the future, post-rupture, ending pain instead of engendering it. Do you imagine I could induce a ruptured eardrum by sticking a needle, or a pen, or perhaps an ice pick, in my ear? Because my eardrum hurts. As I endure the pain with no little whining, I gain sympathy for children and their cycle of ear and sinus and throat and eye infections. Children endure much more pain than adults. That may not be true but with this newfound sympathy perhaps I'm ready to bring children into the world to endure its pain, if I haven't already. Is that you screaming, or my ear? I'm going to try my other ear. Hello?

Nothing.

You hang up. Is your ear infection spreading to your other ear? Did you transmit it via phone, or the pen cap with which you habitually itch your ear canals? Or was the scream infection slower to take in your less dominant ear? None of these are the relevant question, which is, What to do about your ear infection or ear infections?

You could call the doctor, but you can't hear. You could go to the doctor, but the scream could be lurking outside your door. You could chat online with a doctor, but you have this innate defiance of authority and you refuse to cooperate in a socioeconomic power structure that places doctors near the apex of a pyramid at the knees of god. You could research home remedies online, but that sounds like an activity that would add suffering on top of suffering without reducing the original suffering.

You can choose to endure the pain or not endure the pain.

You decide there is nothing to be gained by enduring this pain. You can't wait around forever to be cured; you have things to do. You close your eyes and plug your nose and crawl upstairs and rummage in the upstairs bathroom and slink back downstairs with a box of pill bottles. Wipe bodily fluid off prescription bottles until you uncover a half-full bottle of expired amoxicillin pills. Consume them. An antibiotic is killing the bug in your ear. You are being freed of the scream by your modern medical science, by our advanced technology, by their engineering. There is no reason for sickness, or disease, or death, there is no reason to endure suffering or to be afflicted or to try yourself by swimming out of the mainstream, there is no reason to listen to a scream or to read a scream or to scream, there is no reason to do anything you don't want to do. Stop reading. Do not endanger yourself here any longer. You said you have things to do. Go do

them. The end. Go.

Or you decide there is something to be gained by enduring this pain. Or at least something to not be lost, that something being life. There are bottles of expired antibiotic somewhere in the mess upstairs, but you don't want to be the one responsible for directing the evolution of the next antibiotic resistant superbug, which could finally mercifully painfully end the human race. Very noble, but what of yourself? What of the possibility of the infection getting worse instead of better? You could keep the expired antibiotics as backup so that if the pain gets bad enough, you could go back on your word. But will the expired antibiotics be less likely to be effective against a more severe infection? And what if – wait, listen, yes in the other ear nothing, pain, voices, bell buzzing ocean roaring heart throbbing scream, from both directions, right and left, east and west, above and below, in and out – it has already happened. The dreaded double ear infection has been confirmed. But what if it spreads to your brain? It's all connected: snot, mucus membranes, lymph tubes, interstitial brain fluid. Would a brain infection be a bad thing? Would you get to hallucinate? It would be something different, a different pain. It could alter your perception just enough for you to understand why the world is how it is, why Hercules can kill his wife and children and become a hero, almost a god, though mostly you mean more mundane quandaries like why you should exist at all, and what's the point, and when will suffering end, and where is the relevance of our time and place in the history of the universe, and how to live. A brain infection could free you to experience other worlds. Worlds of joy and love, imagined nirvanas. Or it could make you feel like your head is being deep fried in hot oil and reamed out with a serving spoon. The realm of possible worlds extends far beyond anything you can imagine, far beyond carbon-based life and your confined conception of what it is to live. If you were experiencing another world, would you be aware of it? If not, what's the point? And is the possibility of an affirming alternate experience greater than the possibility of immense pain and insufferable suffering? Catatonic might be the best you can hope for. And what if the infection doesn't get worse or better, but stays exactly the same without change or fluctuation or motion or indication of the passage of time -- time is motion -- until you die, or beyond, and you can never again hear, except for the high never-varying pitch of an unmodulated scream? What if you are never again to know painlessness? What if all that's left you is an eternal, repetitive agony of what if's? What if you've been through all the what if's and the rest of you is redundancy? What if, returning to your present situation, the infection becomes too great for your stash of expired antibiotics? Then you will expire. Que será, será. Nothing to be done about it, since you decided not to take them and not to call a doctor and protect

humanity. Perhaps someone will be able to use you after you expire. Though they'll have to act quickly; you'll begin to deteriorate and rot before long. There is little you can think of that you'll be good for once you leave this world: dead weight, food, a corpus for a Frankenstein, organ donations, necrophilic satisfaction, scientific investigation into reflex and the biochemical composition of your brain and the mechanism of scream infection, and metaphysical inquiry. You won't be useful for economic work, not that you believe in economy. You won't be able to do anything useful, not that there's anything useful to be done. Your thoughts will rot faster than you. The love, as well as hate, stored within you is unclaimable; you cannot endow it upon your death; it will go ungiven. If you are meant to expire, and you are, you will. It's a matter of when, and how, and where, and why, or maybe not why, but what for, though depending on how and when and where, the answer to what for might be nothing, which it usually is. What if the pain persists, but before you expire it becomes too great to endure and learn from? Fortunately, you have some expired prescription painkillers left over from your wife's C-sections or bad teeth or balky back, if you have a wife, and they're downstairs so you needn't wade through the clutter of possessions upstairs and experience the traumatic side-effects of discovering who, if anyone, is up there and what, if anything, happened upstairs and how, if at all, it is related to the scream. You needn't endure the pain alone; you needn't endure the pain at all. This isn't the Middle Ages; it's your middle ear. You're middle-aged, like everyone, and you've earned the right by virtue of living for several decades to live painlessly. What vital lesson could ache possibly teach you? How could numbing the hurt that incapacitates you do harm to humanity? What could be essential about an incessant screaming pain in your ear, or ears? Prescription-strength ibuprofen, acetaminophen with codeine, with hydrocodone, with oxycodone, OxyContin, Percocet -- there's more pills to search through but you stop at Percocet, because brand name oxycodone with acetaminophen is a good place to start, isn't it, for socially-condoned painlessness? You take two. Three. Wait. You begin to feel like poppies look. A color burst. Not ecstasy. Contentment. Nothing matters. The scream in your ear is still there and won't go away until your eardrum bursts, it can't get out, if then, it may not want to, but it no longer reeks of pain and bores at your will to live. The scream is your companion. The scream's presence is pleasant, comforting, loving. The scream sings to you. That you cannot hear will be irrelevant.

Under the influence, no, under the freedom, under the release, under the serenity of prescription medications not prescribed to you, you can face the next task in your long short life.

Wanting a second opinion about your scream infection,

you call your West Neighbor, for whom you now feel affection, at 57.

In over your head and feeling so rare you don't want to move, you call the cops at 37.

Never a fan of dialogue, let alone conversations, you do nothing about the scream except pleasantly ride it out on Percocet and call no one and go nowhere to 195.

Relaxed and confident from the Percocet, you chase the scream from the comfort of your Lay-Z-Boy at 32.

Heart-warmed by the companionship communicated to you by your East Neighbor but disappointed the conversation fizzled, and capable of handling the outside world now that your perception and neurotransmitter makeup have been realigned, you go to your East Neighbor's front door at 185.

128.

You sit in the passenger seat, your heart racing in anticipation of the Having mercurially raced to the ambulance, fingers in your ears and arms approaching adventure, your excitement for life rekindled, your hands to yourself.

bent alongside your head like the fixed wings of a missile, you alight on the running

The pizza girl lets out the biodiesel's throttle and drops the e-brake and peels out.

board, glare incendiarily through the passenger window at delighted you adjacent

As you look out your window to say goodbye to your house, to your neighbors, to

to the pizza girl wearing no skirt to speak of, and consider how to lay hands on you.

your neighborhood, to your chickens and your East Neighbor's dog, to your life

The ambulance accelerates profoundly for a biodiesel, leaving behind a thin wisp of

that has so long throttled you, you see your reflection. It is covetous and frozen and

fried fish in the cold air but not you. You in the passenger seat try to lock the door

its ears are plugged with your fingers. You frantically try to lock the door in your

on you but you are inept. You won't get away so easily, you think. You won't leave

face but incomprehensibly cannot. Flummoxed, you unlatch the door and kick it

me behind to fester in this purgatory of screaming and being screamed at and open to send you flying. In concert with you Viola swings the ambulance left to

searching for screams and plugging my ears. You won't steal the ride I am stealing.

shake you loose. But you have a good grip. Without explaining herself to you she

You rip your right index finger out of your right ear and hear the wind and grab the

swings the ambulance back to the right. She is against you. Or else she ran out of

door handle and whip open the door while travelling at high speeds. The door road to the left. Like a fish bursting from the surface of a placid lake, you burst into

opens with greater force than you anticipated. Your one-handed grip is precarious.

the ambulance. Your fist hard as a rock hits you in the jaw. You see stars. The stars

You rip your other finger out of your other ear and hold to the end of the door, ice-

are beautiful. They fade. You pull your wool hat down over your eyes with one hand

flecked blood oozing from both ears. The pizza girl, at some cruel impetus, pulls a

and drive your walking stick -- you go nowhere without it -- into your stomach,

hard left and centrifugal forces increase and you flap in the manmade gale like a

shattering your hairy shell of ice. You hear the pizza girl say, "Pizza." The pizza box

sheet on a clothesline or a plastic bag in a tree or a slipping aerialist. She is against

is crushed under both of you and you're very hungry. You struggle to extricate

the

you. You hold on unrealistically, a superhuman flag. But perhaps she has second

stick from your tangled bodies and deliver a deathblow and then eat pizza. As you

thoughts or loves you or wants to be with you after all: she pulls a hard right. You

struggle, something enters your ear. You scream. You see her black nails in

scrabble around the door as it swings shut with you on its inside into the cab leading

vertiginous close-up before they enter your eyes and see no more. You scream.

with your woolen fist frozen solid. The punch lands on your face. You think you

Blind and deaf, you don't know what is happening. You hit pavement. You cease

knock yourself out but the walking stick you left behind smashes into your stomach.

screaming. You see starless, lightless void. You die. In a superhuman achievement,

Doubled over you roll onto the center console, cherry slushy spilling from your ears,

you one with yourself in death decide you are not ready to stop existing, not ready

momentarily admiring the fireworks on the back of your eyelids. The pizza girl says

for the silence -- maybe because you died hungry -- and reach out with your

without screaming, "I didn't choose this." You feel her pain. Open your eyes and

extrasensory perception, apply your science fiction powers of telecommunication,

look for the pizza box and don't see it but know nevertheless there isn't enough

say a transmigration prayer to your postmodern agnostic higher power, or scream

pizza for three. Break off an icicle from your nose and insert it in your ear and listen

your awareness after the bald pizza girl with no skirt to speak of and what you

to you scream and anticipate escaping your life forever. While you listen, she

elbows

imagine is no underwear, tears dripping down her leg. After an agonizing delay, not

you in the mouth and digs her thumb and forefinger, long-nailed in chipped black

because she is hard to identify -- in a world of people who are essentially identical,

polish into your eyeballs. You are screaming. "Fuck you," the pizza girl says, "Both

there has never been a woman of her vivid description -- nor because she is hard to

of you scream like girls." She pulls a hard left, leaning far out her window so the

find -- your shrieking awareness tracks her vegetable oil fumes of fried fish despite

ambulance doesn't flip. The passenger door flies open and you, entangled with

the absence of a nose caused by disembodiment -- but because she drives so fast --

yourself, roll out into the air at a high velocity as the ambulance speeds away, gone

contrary to popular belief your awareness does not travel at the speed of light

--

while the knot of you is still flying, screaming bloody murder, yet to hit pavement

even in its desperation to relinquish itself to another instead of to nothing it is all

and skid and bounce and scuff and inelastically deform and break and suffer
your awareness can do to maintain the great distance between you, let alone outpace

material failure. You land in the street. You go silent. You go to 2.

her, and there is a long time when you think you won't catch her, and you regret your decision to not die, caught in a limbo of hurtling eternally at high velocity between bodies, but finally she eases off the gas and you fly through the back of the ambulance and scream into her and cease screaming in your murdereress at 111.

129.

Outside, your fingers freeze in your ears and your sweat in your eyes. You

hear not the sung scream behind you. You hear your fingers. A pulse. Nothing. What you want to hear. The stinging frozen sweat in your eyes prisms your sight like a fly's. You see more than you want to see. A bald pizza girl on your porch wearing no skirt to speak of and what you imagine is no underwear with tears trickling from the inside of her thigh and down her leg pushing your doorbell without sound. The ambulance quietly rocking as if two people wrestle in the back. The ambulance simultaneously silently being started by the bald pizza girl, the ambulance accelerating, a man in the passenger seat who looks like you. Lovelorn you, desperate for companionship and willfully deaf, Odyssean you on your quest to find Penelope, that scream you've cheated on so often, though not with the Siren/Medusa/Woman. You with faceted sight.

Go to 151 to save the pizza girl from your house and see if she is a remedy for the glorious scream you just escaped and to maybe eat some pizza.

Run as if on winged feet to the ambulance's passenger door as it pulls out at 128 to claim your place from the man who looks like you who's stolen your seat in the vehicle by which you are to escape from this life finally and journey to foreign lands and unknown countries while chasing a mythical scream you could possibly have just heard if you had wanted to heroically slay it or be slayed by it.

Fly to the back of the ambulance at 56 as you sense that another scream is about to be perpetrated within and it is your duty to throttle it and help its victims or die trying.

130.

Is it possible that the passages shrink in their dotage? You find it harder to pass. Or is it your ameliorating, impersistent memory? Do the passages age? Many materials shrink as they age: lumber, grapes, people. But stone? You assumed the maze immutable, interminable, eternal, or ancient enough to approximate eternal within your limited human conception of time, a constant. Perhaps the Labyrinth does not change in time but changes with space, the changes all in the design, the passages narrowing the further from the origin you go. But you already feel like a cow run into a chute to be cut or branded or shot with antibiotics or butchered, like a skunk trapped in a skunk trap unable to back up and unable to lift your tail to stink the world with your malodorous scream expressing your entrapment before you are tossed trap and all into a trough of water to drown silently, like an overweight soul strapped to a table and

shoehorned into the donut of a CAT scan machine to assess the operability of a malignant brain tumor or to explore the functioning of your benign brain, which the doctors and the scientists and the psychiatrists and the philosophers and your friends and your relatives and your acquaintances and your spouse if you have one want to make sense of. Fuck them. You are not going into that torture device. Or you are, nowhere else to go, but you're gonna pass right through to the other side and leave them behind, the passages are portals to other dimensions. Of course they're tight, to restrict the flow, not everyone can abandon this dimension for another or here would deflate. Perhaps the passages aren't getting narrower, though they're certainly as long as ever and on average seem to be lengthening. Perhaps their coefficient of friction increases as they desiccate in their maturity. Your wool frays from the abrasion, the back of your head is sanded bald, your nose is polished. Soon you will be unable to continue, you are unsure if you continue, you may fail to reach the other dimension. You are a fly caught in a spider web, a fly stuck on flypaper, a fly in a Venus flytrap. Waiting to die. Waiting for another dimension to come to you. Waiting for the monster to arrive and mercifully tear you limb from limb and devour you. Housing a monster is why labyrinths are built. You imagine the monster of the Labyrinth to be less bull than the Minotaur, less human, less like what you imagine the progeny of a bull and woman to be, and more serpentine, more vermin, more insect. It passes with ease with speed with malignancy through the passages. And what of a liquid monster, or a gaseous monster, or a sound monster, a vibration, an energy, a radiation, like light, no, is that the clicking of chitin on stone? The pitter-patter of many feet? The slithering undulations of feetlessness? The rat chewing ravenously on the stone corner of the chamber you near? Egg after egg descending from the spider's abdomen in the den you approach where she will force you to fertilize her ovum and then feed you to her children. The serpent's hiss and smooth skin wrapping around your constricted personhood. The clack of hundreds of vermin teeth descending on you from forward and behind. The hiss of breath forced out of you as the walls coil around you and squeeze. Your inability to scream, airless, constricted, cocooned, gnawed. Your heave of breath when you are plunked into another waiting room empty but for you, another chamber, the same dimension, followed by the thunk of Medusa's head, three passages leading off, as ever, a torch lit message on the one bare wall:

If you turn east, then writhe forever to 165.
If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 69.
If you turn north, then slip forever to 82.

131.

The buffeting relents. A touch of wind, curious at the corner, swirls; the rest blasts past. You smell smoke caught in the vortices. Underneath the smoke, you smell a lack of hygiene. Body odor. A dozen people huddle around a fire of scrapwood repurposed from the collapsed barn, pushed over by wind or time or carpenter ants. You feel welcomed by their disfigurement and lack of interest in you. You cannot tell which are male and which female. They are dirty like you and deformed like you and dressed like you, and none scream when you join them around the fire. A few look your direction before returning their gaze to the fire, and that is all the acknowledgement you receive. No one's lips move in mumble or purse in whistle or open in speech. Some lips are parted slightly in possible moans, but you suspect they are mouth breathers. Those who have hands are empty-handed. You stand with them in a circle of churned mud. Into the fire you stare. Shins, chest, face are warmed. Hand and nub are held out and warmed. Your heart slows. The fire dances silently. Orange flames, blue where the paint burns, red coals throbbing. The noxious smoke swirls and visits each in turn, but none move or flinch or close your eyes when the cloud envelops you. You inhale and exhale and perhaps cough and stare into the fire until the plume passes and the next is inundated. Of the vagrant hands and homeless nubs reaching out to the fire, you neither know nor care which are yours.

From outside the circle comes a disturbance. No one turns to look but several of you shift to allow others to enter the circle. The just-arrived of you bear planks and struts and joists and shingles and brackets and nails and hay and hardware and horse feed and halters and ropes and horseshoes from the collapsed barn. You toss it all on the fire. A steady chain of you come, piling on the debris. You all step back so the fire won't melt your face or ignite your rags. The circle expands, making room for more of you. You passively watch the fire work, burning the wreckage, melting the snow, licking your faces, dry-heaving heat, consuming a collapsed shelter for the itinerant, carving a wall-less, roofless, temporary shelter for you from the cold, converting matter to energy and growing. Your circle grows. More of you come from the fallen barn dragging your bodies, bodies adorned in red lumber shards or fallen bird nests or bent nails. Your apathetic bodies are tossed on the fire. Body after body, dampening the fire's fury. The smoke sits, thickens, shrouds you in burning hair and seared meat and putrefied skin and purified souls, and then the fire recovers and roars once more if any of you can hear it and leaps again for the sky before your involuntarily watering eyes, none of which cry, none of which scream, none of which express emotion. All of which are dead without the fortune of being dead, disembodied like your other forgotten eye, homeless with nowhere to go

and without relation to time.

The fire dies. The fuel is spent. The energy lost to the environment. Charred bones mound atop glowing coals. You begin to stir, to cool, to glance at each other with shame, with hunger. The wind has blown itself away. You circle the house restlessly. There are no doors, no first floor windows, no wraparound porch. You beat on the walls. You holler at the dormer windows. You mill in the yard. You don't go because there is nowhere to go. Cloudless, the dark early morning sky above is boundless. A still cold settles. You churn the snow to gray. In a copse of bare oaks bordering one side of the yard you find and gather around a circular hole, earth piled beside, marked by a worn gravestone stripped of snow and names and dates. You cannot see the bottom. A dirty old woman climbs out with a basket of dirt, dumps it, and descends again. In unison you surge forward but only one of you can fit at once and you push and pull and yank hair and swing elbows and kick knees and rend rags and bite ears and throw fists and gouge eyes and scream at each other, but you cannot hear, and your vacant eye is immune to gouging, and with your one hand you wield your mighty hooked staff. With these inherited advantages you break free of the scrum and leap into the hole, air rushing into your open mouth, past the woman, falling and falling to 138.

132.

Footsteps trailing you in the frost, walking stick thumping beside you, you walk east to and then south up the walk to your East Neighbor's East Neighbor's front door. The house is of the same design as but somewhat smaller than your East Neighbor's, which is of the same floor plan as yours, if slightly smaller, though after these years away you cannot safely say that you precisely remember your house. You pull a donkey tail hanging beside the front door of your East Neighbor's East Neighbor, who you'll abbreviate as Enen to be concise because you're running out of time; it's been years and you've seen neither hide nor hair of this scream and you could die today or tomorrow or yesterday. The door opens and an Enen grabs you by the scruff of the neck and yanks you inside.

- You born in a barn?, Enen says.
- Or a zoo?, Enen says.
- Or a laboratory?, Enen says.
- Or did ya just walk out of the ocean, saggy fishhook lip? Where's your fish tail?, Enen says.
- Who rings the doorbell? If you wake the baby you'll get an earful, Enen says.
- Or a mouthful, Enen says. A mouthful of hair, old man. A hairball.

-- Do you have a baby?, you hack in.

-- You don't know, do ya, primordial biped? But you rang the doorbell. Did your mother teach you nothing?

Enen is dressed like a cat, with little ears on his and her head, black leotards and tights on their svelte bodies, whiskers drawn on his and her cheeks, the tips of their noses painted black, and tails attached to his and her tailbones.

-- What's with the wool?, Enen demands.

-- Have you heard a scream?

The room stops. In the sudden stillness you realize everything in the living room or den was in motion, fluid, animal, crawling over itself, chasing, licking, breathing, ears swiveling, snouts pointing, and tails ... at every turn. The den is filled with animals and their tails: cats, dogs, rats, possums, lizards, raccoons, peacocks, beavers, a Komodo dragon, squirrels, eels in tanks, porcupines, spider monkeys, a Gila monster, nutria, non-spider monkeys, armadillos, snakes. The tails: bushy, hairless, straight, curled, striped, spotted, scaled, flat, unfurled, coiled, serpentine, erect, wagging, chased, probing, a nose sniffing under, a nose tucked under, slapping the floor as if a pond, tails hanging down, bodies hanging from tails, tails expressing and balancing and comforting and scenting. All the tails, including the snakes, which are nothing but tails with heads, have stopped moving and are pointing at you. You rephrase your question.

-- I'm tailing a scream.

An Enen locks the door behind you and gives you a knowing nod while the other Enen offers a bowl of oranges.

-- Orange? Neighbor brought them over, but we're not into fruits and vegetables.

-- Thank you, you say with your mother's manners, but no, I'm short of time or breath. If you have any information that will help me tail this scream --

-- Tail in what way?

-- I don't know what way. That's the problem, I lost it.

-- Lost the tail?

-- The scream.

-- And when you find it, you will tail it?

-- No, I'll tail it till I find it.

-- And then?

-- I don't know, but I'll be done tailing it.

-- So when you say tail it, do you intend to say you will remove a tail from it, as one might tail a green bean or a lizard to see if it'll grow a new one or, Enen gags a little, a boxer?

-- Or, says the other Enen, do you intend to say you'll add a tail to it, as one

might tail a donkey, or a tale to a book of tales, or a tail to a sock monkey, or a trail to a forest, or a tail to me, surgically?

-- I intended to say what I said.

-- Because if it's the former, it is only reasonable to ask why you hate the scream, why you persecute it, why you seek to perpetrate inhumane practices upon this scream.

-- And if it's the latter, it is only logical to ask why you love this scream, why you dedicate your life to it, why you seek to give it the tool of higher expression.

-- Yes, well, if I haven't made it clear by now, I both love and hate the scream. I want to be it forever and I want it to nevermore haunt the Earth. And I think the reason we are miscommunicating is that it already has a long tail, and it is this tail I'm trying to follow. It is this tale I'm trying to tell, rather than add or remove, in pursuit of the scream. So allow me to rephrase for clarity, have you seen my scream's tail?

-- What does your scream's tail look like?

-- Full. High. Well-rounded. Undulating. Exhibiting all the emotions. Braided. Always trailing behind the scream. It's possible it resembles many tails to the naked, unaccustomed eye.

-- You need to scream to be reminded what it's like. Once you recognize it again, you can recommence chasing your tail.

-- No, my scream's tail is not my own. I don't have a tail.

-- But your scream does.

-- Again, for improved comprehension, another thing I mean when I say I'm tailing a scream can be glimpsed by considering that a tailing is also the occasionally aesthetically beautiful (think rivers of ironically vibrant red) but devastatingly pollutive effluvial waste that is the byproduct of mining and purifying what's mined --

-- We, Enen, do not much care for how you equivocate your intentions with this scream --

-- And its tail. Sounds like you're playing cat and mouse --

-- Or dog and cat --

-- Or rat and snake --

-- Or snake and ungulate --

-- We live what we believe: all tails can live together in peace and harmony.

-- Except for those who wish to cut off the tail of another for the sake of brevity or aesthetic appearance or a gourmet entree or --

-- I really need to be getting on with my tale, you say, not oblivious to the increase in growling, hissing, and rigidity of tails in the den. I don't wish to take your time with talk, it's obvious you haven't heard my scream.

-- We may yet.

-- You need a tail.

An undocked schnauzer leaps and bites your forearm but your wool is thick. The hairball hangs thrashing on one arm as you brandish your walking stick threateningly like an extra appendage at the end of your other arm. You, backed against the locked door, without a free hand to unlock it, tails and their menacing bodies creeping in, haven't much time; you can't hold them all at bay; they'll force a tail on you and you will have no say as to species or length or furriness or dexterity or whether it's attached by hot glue or needle and sutures or skin graft, and you do not wish to be the scream on the end of another's tail, no matter if the intention behind its administration is peace or love. If a tail it will be it will be your tale; you exercise your freedom of choice to not submit to a couple who dresses up as cats, even if their attractiveness is above average and their costuming exemplifies a greater commitment than most felines. In a fury of self-determination you swing your stick like an Ankylosaurus tail and catch a tabby in the head, an alligator in the gut, a monkey on the toe, and an Enen in the tailbone. Deflecting numerous tails to create space for yourself, you step away from the door, smash a picture window framing a peaceful quaint frosty winter night suburban street scene in which the first freckles of snow fall, and just before a python encircles you turn tail and leap through the window, screaming, wool protecting you from shards of glass, your scream spreading like a river delta into the silence, the silence pushing back inland like a high tide, the fecund estuaries and riparian areas and intermittent marshes of the intertidal mixing zone ripe with the song and quack and squawk and screech of shorebirds and water fowl and raptors, and flee to Enen's East Neighbor at 119, tailed by predator howl and paw pounding and tail swoosh.

133.

Waiting for the ants to work gives you time. Time to reflect on your purpose, on your investigation, on what exactly you are doing. Time to dwell on what you've accomplished, what you've learned, how much of the scream you've caught.

You have possibly ascertained unreliable possibilities for the when, who, where, and what of the scream.

Don't do this to yourself, you tell yourself. Do not dwell on what has happened, but what is happening. Yes, the scream was in the past, and its energy has long since dissipated, absorbed by wall and air and eardrum, but it lives on in you. Bottled. Repressed. You dig for it, to release it, to free yourself and thereby the world of it, to capture it in words, to confine it to a book, to bottle it.

And if anyone decides they want such a scream as yours, instead of inflicting unbearable pleasure or pain on themselves or another, they can innocuously buy your book, which is a bottled scream, commodified suffering or joy, and save themselves a heap of trouble. You are improving social and economic and communal efficiency. Though they may disturb the neighbors when they open their new book bottle, no one will suffer – your suffering will be in the past – and the consumer will get what they want, the entertainment of a scream, the experience of a scream, the existential realignment of a scream, the vicarious agony and internalized ecstasy and emotional epiphany – no, don't put words into your readers' mouths, don't tell them what they want. There will be no more perpetrators or victims, only producers and consumers, makers and takers. And more importantly, the reader will be able to exercise their freedom of choice to purchase and apply a scream when and how and where and with whom it will benefit them most. You dream of a future where a consumer stands before shelves stocked wall-to-wall and ceiling-high with varieties of screams in book bottles, screams for every need, screams for needs you didn't know you had, screams for the dark and the light, screams for adults and screams for children and screams for tweeners, all the screams differentiated by their labels, their marketing, their packaging, bright or bloody or scholarly or black or plastic or abstract or representational or bursting at lace or a cartoon vehicle or impenetrability. You dream of the glory of the individual frozen before the abundance of choices and the minutiae of screams and the ambiguity of his or her needs, unable to scream. The world will be a quieter place because of you.

No, the future, like the past, like a dream, is nothing. You chose wisely. You chose Eastern inaction, which is a different beast than Western inaction. You are doing the world a great service by not going out in it. The scream's secrets are within you, not without. Outside is distraction and motive and people and dogs and commodity and snowflakes and chickens and your mother, and somewhere your pizza, but the scream is within you. You need not infect the other world outside you, outside these interior leaves. What exists outside the walls of your home, the skin of your thoughts, the binding of your creation is nothing. There is nothing beyond the box of your room and the sag of your chair and the munching of ants and the shine of the light. Outside of you, all is make-believe. Within you is the genesis of a world, its growth and evolution, its cycles and stagnation, its history and culmination, its conclusion. Within you, the world is now. Within you, this world's scream lives. Under the papers on your desk you find a plastic sandwich bag empty but for crumbs and a smear of jelly. You pour a glass of water into it. You twist the top and wrap the twist in a rubberband. You don't have money for ziplocs, and if you do you think ziplocs are a waste of what

little money you have not to mention the increase in the defilement of your world perpetrated by the extra plastic and its constituent petroleum and the requisite increase in industrial processes involved in creating such a quality consumer product as the ziploc. With the finest of your pens, not with your teeth, which lack precision, you poke a hole in a corner of the bag. Standing behind the head of the chair and your head, you spread your legs for stability, and bend your knees and squat to reduce the distance between the baggie and your forehead to improve your aim. You hold your arms straight ahead of you, level from your shoulders, bracing your right wrist in your left hand, holding the baggy of water with your right hand over your head in the chair so that it drips slowly onto your forehead. The water drips slower and slower, stretching time, each drip impacting the same spot on your forehead with equal force. Sweating from holding the bag excruciatingly still, you imagine the drip wearing a hole, eroding a depression, boring a hole into your skull. You remain rigid, a scaffold supporting the attenuating drip, slowing time, grasping your hand grasping the bag, exerting a true aim, striking the same location on your forehead again and again through 140.

134.

The first thing you want us, your voyeurs, to know is that, yes, it's sexual, sexual for you, you don't know about her, she's not naked, you are, she almost is, wearing that gold diaphanous robe and those dreadlocks full of twigs and shells and pine cones and titmice and mice, but bodily arousal is not what you're paying her your life for. She stands to face you and struggles to hold up her head of dreads crowning her, robing her, applying a forever downward pull on her thoughts and dreams, dragging her down. Your concern for her pleasure and pain mounts but she plants her feet and raises her face and tips back her head revealing her full-throated instrument and starts to scream and the dreadlocks are roused, they levitate and twine and sing, and it's not the titmice or the mice doing it, she isn't Cinderella, she's more than a fairytale, cheeks pale as death, her brown or blue or green or hazel eyes gazing at nowhere, brow knit permanently with pain like rock rippled by ancient evaporated seas, lips turgid as asparagus in spring, mouth moist and life-supporting as a tidal pool and dark as a grotto, crow wings folded at the corners of her eyes, her breasts ripe juicy mangoes glimpsed through the writhing foliage of dreads, her robe solidifying to slate gray, to iron, oxidizing to rust, red dust falling from her as she vibrates. You turning hard as stone. Fine, it's sexual, but it's more, you rage against us, your doubters, it's forever this scream, it lasts longer than two minutes, it's not pelvises slapping stickily to arrive at a fleeting underwhelming epilepsy euphemism epiglottis

epistle epiphany. It's a scream, the scream, your scream, you've found it, your scream expressing the width and depth and height and curvature and surface area and volume of human emotion: love and loss and grief and joy and anxiety and boredom and jealousy and covetousness and desire and repulsion and apathy and passion and fear and anticipation and satisfaction and the flatline. It's everything you hoped and more, and as your body turns hard as stone from your toes up, you are enlightened and more and more blood is forced up into your head, with all the extra blood and oxygenation you feel enlightened but perhaps there is no, yes, there is no difference between feeling enlightened and being enlightened, you are enlightened forced up and up -- No, you cry again to us, who vilify you for getting off grandiosely on a scream, for orgasming ultimately on suicide, for extrapolating ecstasy into enlightenment, Silence, you say, and watch if you must but allow me to experience unadulterated transcendence, as you look upon her and upon her and upon her and open yourself to her sung scream, a solo joined in chorus by each snaking dreadlock dancing in the air, what weighed her down now makes her light, the screaming snakes bear her aloft, buoyed by song hued in hope of a lower density than air. She floats up and you are stone from foot to breast, a statue of a man with a walking stick, a statue of a man from long ago that will last long into the future, and she, a whore so ugly she's beautiful, enduring the impossible to conceive for the neverending length of her merciless, monstrously long life, pours herself out all her snake mouths, of which your mouth has become another, a notch in her bedpost, a snakeskin in her underwear drawer, another dreadlock to chain her down and hoist her up, another voice in her choir singing the scream of human existence from the gut, in the gut, with no audience but you, you who are no longer audience but actor, no audience but us, us who she doesn't know are here, us who she doesn't know exists, us who cannot hear her or you and know how complete and disintegrated and everywhere and here and nowhere and shredded and expansive and solitary and unalone and engorged with blood you feel as the stone climbs your neck and your head bulges and your remaining air is propelled past your taught vocal chords and your scream, the final note of your song, heightens, climaxes, the pressure within your brain your mind your consciousness exceeding the material properties to which your skull is rated and your head explodes. Your scream turns liquid and fountains from the end of your ragged windpipe. Molecular bits of your cranium and brain and gray matter and neurons and neurochemicals and olfactory and auditory and ocular organs and skin and mouth are sprayed into the gut of the house like shattered glass. A plume of dust. Your life has been sacrificed, but you heard what few or many have heard, the hope of the whore's song, and what's left of you, your meager consciousness, which persists a

moment longer than your head, though not so long as the echo of your scream, hears the hope die as the dreadlocks fury the air consuming your vaporized flesh or hears the choked sob of the whore as she stops singing and collapses again into her vanishing chair or hears us drifting away from you and hears nothing more, having arrived at 2.

135.

You are not here, but here your forehead feels damp, which in your dreams often means you need to wake and use the toilet before you pee yourself. But you are not yourself. You are not your body. You are not your pee or your need to pee. If you pee, you don't pee yourself. You let it go. You are not here, a percentage of your awareness is at 141, you are here so intensely that you are everywhere, experiencing all worlds, all possibilities. You are aware of a world consisting entirely of screams, and a world entirely absent of screams, and all the worlds comprising the spectrum between. You understand how insignificant your scream is amid the innumerable screams that have existed or exist or will exist and all the screams that are possible. You also understand how significant your scream is; it is the only one you have. Your scream is everything and nothing, as you are everywhere and nowhere. Deep within yourself, which is neither here nor there, you seek the scream without seeking. You let it go so it may return to you, like birds and lovers are supposed to but never do, like children only do on major holidays. You discard all possessions and worries and concerns and obligations and debts and aspirations and attachments and desires. You discard your desire for the scream. You discard your desire for desirelessness. You empty your disembodied body to create a space, emptiness, void within which the scream's bud may break. You meditate on this nothing and wait with no perception of time but the deepening dampness on your forehead abandoned to its own devices like a child left unsupervised while you work to allow the scream to blossom and unfold and pollinate and be pollinated and fruit and fill and fall in the space you made for it, in the emptiness that has always been your heart and your goad and your inspiration and your torture and your nemesis and your love and your obsession and your distraction and your direction and your impetus and your quicksand and your match and your smoking gun and your sunset and your reason to live and your reason to die, in the void within and without.

136.

You hesitate with self-possession and rub adroitly against the window frame as you decide whether to saunter or slink or slip or glide or bound or _____

through the open window. The room is purple. You purr. The puerility you survey perturbs you to self-purification. With a cough you purge a hairball in the corner and lick yourself until, groomed and cleansed of pernicious, self-pleasuring, tail-chasing-in-the-drained-bathtub wordplay, you can purr again. The room is ultraviolet under the overhead blacklight. The scream is not here if it ever was. The duvet on the four-post king bed glows like a pristine field of purple snow softening buried topography on a moonlit night. The walls are quilted with black velvet posters reminiscent of etchings from early printmaking or classical relief carvings in marble above lintels and below eaves and circling around columns wherein glow buff heroes saving scantily clad and impossibly proportioned but very grateful women from fire-breathing chimera or tangle-headed serpents or diffident bullmen or your own imagined monstrosities (pitbull or foreclosure or Alzheimer's: the depictions change into whatever fears pass through your mind) with naught but shield, sword, and, you propose, feline wit. In one poster two armies clash, one grandly heroic and the other luridly malevolent, both composed of men from pubescent to grizzled ripping each other apart with their bare hands, blood and spilled organs and stray limbs glowing purple. In another the glowing faces of many beautiful women, and if their beauty is generic it is nevertheless touching as it is a collection of glowing faces and not erogenous zones, look down from the sky as a Sherlockian detective (pipe, magnifying glass, and brain beneath houndstooth or plaid tweed deerstalker hat glowing) handcuffs (glowing) a bourgeoisie (smart phone at hip glowing and electronic shopping bag slung over shoulder glowing and anachronistic newspaper financial indices yet clutched in hands glowing) businessman (dollar signs dripping out of pockets glowing). A flat screen TV, dark, consumes the entirety of one wall. Splotches glow on the walls, the floor, especially the ceiling, and on the black pillowcase where should rest the head of your West Neighbor, whose headless body is tucked to the neck under the glowing duvet. In neither the distribution of splotches nor the shape of each individual splotch can you discern an intentional design, be it representational or abstract. They look flung. Each splotch could be a Rorschach left by the killer for your interpretation, each a clue, each a scent. The detective within you wants to pursue every lead and think hard about the splotches; the cat without you has a hard time caring what the detective wants and is inclined to either toy obsessively with the splotches like catnip or nap. In the end, the detective in you stares at the splotches and they begin to move like enormous amoebas, which is pretty mind blowing, but you accidentally refocus your eyes and they stop and not long after that the detective in you becomes bored with their ambiguity while the cat outside you bats about a feather escaped from the down comforter until

the detective in you is ready to proceed.

Now what? You've found a victim, which was one purpose of the mission you may've given yourself. You should make sure the body is a victim and not a headless villain playing possum. You lick a shoulder. Nothing. You crawl under the blanket, rubbing against the body, naked and cold and unresponsive. You nibble at the neck flesh. You bat at a vertebra and claw at the esophagus and lick the severed carotid and tear off a morsel of muscle. You meow into the larynx. Nothing. You eat your fill.

Satisfied, you amuse yourself by curling up on the pillow where your West Neighbor's head used to be. The detective you can't purge again asks, What now?

The door to the rest of the house is shut. You're a cat so you can't open it. You're accustomed to the purple glow. If you were a raccoon you could probably figure this case out, but you're a lounging, belly-bloated, sated cat. You snooze. The detective in you snoozes too, overcome by feline contentment and the soporific of inaction.

Something catches your eye, one of your eyes is half-open as your snooze, the detective's fault that, and up you jump at the ready, cat-like, for a chase. A brown flash climbing up the curtain and you're leaping off the bed and the tail slinks out the window and you spring out after the rat, hauling your fat belly over the casement, a belly you could cram nothing more in, this chase isn't about your hunger, nor is the chase about rat as possible scream vector or as adult-stalled-in-adolescence exterminator or as cranium devourer, the chase is for the chase, the chase is within you, you chasing your nemesis. You are the chase. All released muscle and absence of thought, you chase the vermin into the night of 121.

137.

Squeezing through this interminable slot you turn two-dimensional like a figurine in an asinine boardgame like Candyland, like a steamrolled cartoon coyote, like a paper doll chained to other paper dolls before and behind that pull you forward as you pull forward trailing repetitions of you. You need to breathe and you can't. You have no depth. You're hungry but what you chase is uncatchable and inconsumable, you don't know the layout of the board or what square you're in or how you move, and the connections between you and others, between you and other yous, the joints at the hands and feet, are ripping. The reason you are lost, you reflect, is that you must translate or compress or decompress or convert the two-dimensional Labyrinth into one dimension to shoehorn it into this linear narrative, no, written form, sure, forward and back. You've excused the third dimension of height or vertical position. You are

underground at a great depth, but you assume you are trapped in a plane. In one dimension there is only forward and back, forward and back you jump over your story, in your conversion you distance yourself from the original design. Not to mention that whatever code you use to designate the rooms is not likely to correspond to the numbers or ciphers or systematic naming of the rooms used by the original architect, whose motive is unknown who may be dead who is unavailable for comment and therefore essentially non-existent to you. Except you are trapped in his or her or its architecture. You are trapped not only in a labyrinth but its cryptic written conversion, the combination of which becomes the Labyrinth. Which makes you wonder why you bother. Has the Labyrinth been constructed such that deducing the algorithm of conversion from 2-D to 1-D is impossible? If it is possible and it hasn't been made solely to beguile frustrate thwart you, to make you feel futility, will you be able to reason its layout? No matter the intentionality of the impenetrability of the Labyrinth's design, will you never decipher it and if so will you wander randomly directionless pointless forever? Since pointlessness is not an emotion that motivates motion, you stop moving. You quit. You give up. You don't bother screaming. There's no one to hear you. You wait to die. Your only regret is how long it will take you to starve or dehydrate or suffocate to death. But other than the amount of time you yet have to live, quitting is liberating. You no longer feel confined. Free of the obligation to progress through the Labyrinth, you can do anything you want. You sit down to figure out what to do while you wait for death. You reflect that you should not be able to sit down if you are still in the passage, and yes perhaps you have unlocked your freedom by quitting the game, but when you look around you you see you are in an empty chamber with four walls, three slots, etc., a torch-lit message inscribed on a wall you beat your head against:

If you turn north, then slip forever to 62.
If you turn east, then writhe forever to 69.
If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 178.

138.

A woman carrying a bag of dirt on her back steps up off the hole's floor and ascends steps up the sides as fast as you descended while another woman arrives at the bottom and picks up the shovel and begins digging a notch at the base of the sidewall, filling her bag with the dirt. A notch in the wall opposite the one she digs contains an open, empty, man-sized wooden box. Looking up you see notches studding the cylindrical wall of the hole, swirling in angular placement as they rise, two notches opposite each other at each elevation, each filled with a closed box, each box protruding slightly from its notch so that the box ends form two helical staircases down one of which descend women with empty bags and up one of which ascend women with bags full of dirt on their backs, as high as you can see up to the nearly invisible pinprick of light through which you entered, the light now obliterated by what you realize is another falling body approaching you at terminal velocity. You scramble into the box. The lid shuts.

You cannot move. It's dark. Your eye adjusts. It's still dark and you still cannot move. Your arms are pinned to your sides and your feet are forced together because the box is tapered and when you breathe, which is more frequently if shallower, your chest presses against the box's top. You flex and flex, arms pushing outwards, slamming your knees and head into the lid, retching from how hard you flex your abdomen trying to sit up, groping for your useless stick wedged beside you, breathing your own breath, accomplishing nothing. Going nowhere. You tell yourself to calm down, relax, breathe deep. The rational side of you says you are safe here from falling bodies and from screams, that at least you chose this warmth and shelter and embrace, this freedom from the hunt, this coffin. It'll all be over soon. The non-rational side of you doesn't hear you. It is this side of you that fears being trapped underground unable to move.

It's not that your death terrifies you; you are death from some points of view. It's not that you're afraid of being alone; you're a solitary being. It's not that you're scared of abandoning your journey incomplete; you long since abandoned the notion of completeness. It is that you cannot move and there is no space and you cannot breathe and there is nowhere to go and you can see nothing but darkness and walls and there is no way out but death and death is not imminent and you cannot move and there is no space and there is nothing for you to do but lie and wait while your muscles ache for motion, your lungs for expansion, your

brain for flight, your being for emptiness unimpeded.

You lie immobilized in the dark for you don't know how long.

You have thus far succeeded in not vomiting on yourself but you don't know if that's wise because if you vomited you'd probably gag on the vomit, asphyxiate, die, and be done. You have the cold sweats in your warm box. Though you can't move, you begin to tremble uncontrollably.

You want to scream, and you might, you don't know, the earth packed around your box dampens all vibrations. No, you are screaming, you are, in your way, but you cannot hear it and may not be producing sound. You're screaming and not screaming. Then you stop because it doesn't do any good, the screaming and not screaming. No, no because. You have no reason left. Your body is wracked, your voice spent, your actions involuntary, your terror tired. You cry quietly. You would be waiting, but there is nothing to wait for. You lie in your box.

With nowhere to go, your seeping tears pile on your eye. Your piled tears cohere and rise forming a short column of salt water, a thick convex lens with a greater curvature on the convex upside than on the concave downside pressed against your eyeball. Monocular you have made yourself a monocle. Your piled tears magnify the darkness. You can barely spy the glimmer of a single photon -- not the glimmer from the photon; the photon is the glimmer -- bouncing wildly in the limited free space of your box like an infinitesimal firefly. Its precarious light focuses your attention. Its flicker is an unexpected comfort. You stare straight ahead, straight up, immobilizing your eye too for fear of shattering your fragile fluid spyglass, and follow the photon in your peripheral vision with your peripheral awareness as it bounces in and out of your eyes, the one you have and the one you don't, somehow never losing energy, somehow massless but a particle, somehow a point but a disturbance propagated in the invisible electromagnetic field, somehow a wave unceasing, encouraging, not yet absorbed or swallowed in darkness, somehow an entity surfing out your predicament with an accepting, laid back attitude bespeaking "this too shall pass, old friend, enjoy what you can," words you've never heard, a companionship you've never felt, from a thing that is almost nothing.

There is a flash. A tsunami of white light inundates your photon. It is lost.

In that instant before your visual cortex is flooded in light and your sight is whitewashed and you are momentarily blinded, you see or think you see inset in the box lid a diabolical mechanism: a hammer held up by a catch lever attached by wire to a black box, a tiny black box within your box, a lens, a camera lens in the black box looking down on you looking up through your lens, the hammer head held hovering over a glass vial with a picture of a skull and crossbones, and below the skull the letters HCN, and below that writ smaller, Hydrocyanic Acid,

and below that in print so fine you could not read it without your magnifier of tears, Beware: Colorless, Extremely Flammable, Very Toxic, Odorless, and below that microscopic drawings nearly as imperceptible as your flushed photon: a cyclone filled with bodies, smoke from a bonfire of bones swirling with car exhaust and cigarette smoke and the fumes of melting plastic bottles, an apple split like an overripe cherry erupting seeds like a volcano, a man and woman trapped on separate rocks in a river of rising magma, the man heaving a head-sized egg -- raw or hard-boiled? -- to her whose mouth is wide in what is perhaps a scream, the man wearing a dark cloak, face hidden in a raised hood, holding a hooked staff -- is it you? does she catch it? are they animated? do the drawings spin? do you spin? no they are fixed on the vial, your eye stationary, you held motionless, but the dizziness, the nausea -- is your spinning photon among those bouncing off the images into your eye and if you closed your eyelid could you hold it, contain it, embrace it forever? -- all of it inset in a recess of the lid of your box immediately above your eye, in a cage within a cage protected from you but not you from it by mesh hardware cloth the likes of which are used to keep out rats -- and the flashbulb igniting and you unseeing and the lens swallowing light.

Within the deluge of photons and the all-consuming white and the not knowing if you are alive or dead or alive and dead and the vertigo from the sensation of spinning around a quantum-sized dark spot in your visual field that is unstationary and whose position is hard to pin down and that you hope is the negative of your photon with whose condition yours has become entangled, an uncertain question turns within you and in response you ask, Will I see my photon again or is this my chance to escape from boxed interminable misery, to evade my claustrophobic sufferings, to die without being buried alive? Will my condition perpetuate, or not? Will I perpetuate my condition, or not? If I answer correctly, will I be released? How can I answer when I cannot speak? What's the question? I couldn't have heard the question because I cannot hear -- was it presented to me in my head? -- was the question asked within me without words? -- and therefore will the asker or the measuring device or the evaluating mechanism be able to read my internal, unspoken, wordless answer? You don't know if you're alive and there is no way to be certain if you're dead, but by immersing yourself in your nostalgia for your lost photon, by imagining yourself your photon, by becoming your photon as much as possible, you resolve the vertiginous light-drowned interrogative choice screwing into you -- Which direction does my photon spin? You internally scream one of the two rotational directions: Clockwise at 143 or Counterclockwise at 144.

You remove your wool: scarf, gloves, jacket, beloved hat. You remove your boots and pants and shirt that beggars description. You remove your long unchanged undergarments, which are not cotton because cotton kills. You stand naked before the last whore, sweaty and cold, your belly bigger than you knew, your chest hair grayer than when you last ran your fingers through it, your knuckles white around your upright walking stick, your sex flaccid but stirring like a fork beating eggs or a whisk whipping cream or a blender blending a smoothie or a knife reconstituting separated peanut butter or a long wooden spoon slowly stirring stew in an old pot brimming with carrots, onions, celery, potatoes, parsnips, and beef or a snake in a snake charmer's basket when he sounds the first note on his flute.

She lowers the footrest of her vanishing leather Williams-Sonoma recliner and rises, pulling a few of her dreadlocks in front of her. The weight of them. She wobbles, pulling dreadlocks over her shoulders, pushing them back, sweeping them from left to right and right to left, her head bobbling but rising with the uncoiling of her sung scream, her pendulous locks adorned with twigs and shells and autumnal leaves, the residence of squirrels and chickadees and titmice and mice, discreetly if not utterly obscuring her ample and naturally sagging breasts and verdant unshorn shrubbery springing from the folded wings of her hips, seeking balance. Her locks curtain her like beads or weeping willow branches or a hair shirt. Her lips part and the song emerges and she's beautiful and ageless and racked in pain, her body luminous but untouchable, her skin burning where the dreadlocks graze, her face seductive and distressed and sympathetic and looking not at you but above and behind you until she pulls one more dreadlock over her shoulder and with a wince her gaze lowers to you. The scream intensifies. Looking through her eyes and down her sinuses into her throat to the top of her windpipe at her vibrating chords you begin to understand how open she must be to sing this scream, how cavernous to thus resonate, the immense pressure on her neck from her head, the constant strain while not reclining in the disappearing Williams-Sonoma recliner, the affront of your request for performance, the weight of your expectations of ecstasy, the agony of transcendentally suiciding you, the ache of never being relieved of this head of hair, the stab of every movement and shift, the responsibility to not let this head, her head, your head, roll right off with all Mother Earth's nature in your hair, your Atlasan desire to be turned to stone so you needn't feel, the incessant frustration of your desire and the everlasting pain it promises, the scream first leaking then gushing out your throat while you clamp down to maintain pitch and imply modulation and craft the scream into a communication, a song that

hurts. With this empathy, this invitation into her via the sung scream, this entering her with your awareness, you harden. At the hardening, the loss of control of self, the solidifying of your life, the making of your body into a sculpture, you involuntarily react in alarm. Your adrenaline drops and you pull back your focus and you hear her dreadlocks hiss. You do not look into her expanse through her eyes or at the pained beauty around her eyes but at your reflection on her eyes, naked and ecstatic and turning to stone in her eyes, and the song doesn't stop and the scream deepens and the dreadlocks rise and dance and you feel you becoming her, feel her everlasting pain rising from toes through knees into hips, and you begin to scream, to assume her scream for her, to relieve her of her scream and experience the eternal scream yourself. But with your last vestige of will or identity or self, you harden further, tempering your emotion or annealing your desire, and determine to empathetically quench her neck of her head, to relieve her of her scream, the scream that is the goal of all your detectiving, the scream that this goddess has sung and screamed and exploded men's heads with for aeons waiting -- without change to be infinite to be a god is to not change -- for the one who would assist her in suicide. All that glazes the act, pretties it, hardens it; your thoughts haven't time to crystalize; you react to live. Before your upper body turns to stone you unscrew the gnarled knob from your walking stick and withdraw the long hidden blade, the gnarled knob is a hilt, and swing the thin sword to your farthest reach, your feet statued in place. She, however, is very experienced. You've decided she wants assisted suicide, but it would be unprofessional of her to make it obvious to you, who are paying her your life to scream and kill you. Also, it's inappropriate for a goddess to ache for death. Her head is just out of reach of your stroke. Nevertheless, your well-honed edge dismembers three to five dreadlocks, which thump to the ground screaming. Your sword follows through in an arc flinging blood onto the wall and floor from her dismembered dreadlocks. With the weight improperly distributed, her head tips back, ripping flesh and tendons and muscle and vertebrae and cartilage, and rolls off her neck. Her head thuds to the ground, the dreads close behind. Blood geysers from her carotid arteries, spraying the ceiling, the mist settling in a halo around her feet. Her voice box, crowning her body, whimpers or sputters as the scream trails off and goes silent. Her last breath sighs or gurgles out her frayed trachea. Her upright body, unveiled or disabused of her gown of dreadlocks, turns to stone. You return to flesh and flaccidity. You feel hollow, like less of a detective for what you've done, less of a man for the collateral damage you've wrought. You know that your quest is not complete, that the Medusa goddess's scream is not the one you seek, that your scream is yet out there, roaming, disturbing, transferring energy. You killed a

scream that wasn't yours. Though she was no innocent, she was a pained, beautiful monstrosity. Despite your remorse you made the right choice, if it can be called a choice, for you remain alive, as does your scream, awaiting your pursuit. You put on your pants and wrap the head in your wool scarf without looking at it and pick it up by the hair, and yes it is as heavy as you imagined, but with all your strength you carry her head, your head, by its dreads, her burden yours. It will be a tool in your quest for your scream, to make others scream, to turn the scream to stone, to make the head scream again, to bottle the scream within the head once you've sewed or cauterized the neck, mouth, eyes, ears, and nostrils shut, to grow dreads yourself to justify your lack of hygiene and as a symbol of your defiance, to learn how to become an immortal whose power is song and death, you're so torn up you don't know why you take the head, but you do, as well as the first door you encounter, which leads downstairs to 117, the basement thank god, because you could not carry this head upstairs or even on the level.

140.

The baggie lightens drip by drip. Your arms quiver, but you hold the position. You will persevere until the ants eat into your brain and the dripping water bores. You can see the slightest of depressions forming in your forehead, the beginning of the cavity to come.

How you want a cigarette or a cigar or a drag or a chew in your lip.

But you sustain. You hold. You make plans. On the side table is a lidded jar, from which you may've drunk hooch or bathtub gin or homebrew or moonshine. You can't remember; it's possible you blacked out, in which case the act is a void on your consciousness, like it never happened, in which case it's possible it never happened, but regardless of whatever happened between you and the jar to drain its former unknown contents, the jar is currently emphatically filled with orange urine. Your previous relationship with the jar is irrelevant; you have a new relationship. At the instant you begin to scream, you will unscrew the lid and dump the piss on the floor and invert the jar over your mouth so that the scream enters it. Then you will screw the lid on very quickly.

Your legs tremble. Your arms dip and a drip misses its mark and lands on your eyeball staring into the light. You steady yourself and say Fuck or Shit or Goddamn Scream-Licking Pointless Redundant-Fuck Sad Son of a Bitch. Your deltoids burn and your quads cramp.

You have a better idea, a more efficient design that will lose less scream to the environment and reduce noise pollution. The very moment before you scream, you will dump the jar contents and completely submerge your mouth by

turning your head over and plunging your face into a large bowl of liquid so that when the scream exits it will form a bubble in the liquid, like a fart in bathwater, and rise to the surface, but you will have turned the jar upside down and pushed its mouth into the water or whatever liquid to catch the scream in the jar when it breaks the surface. You will then screw on the lid before you lift the jar so as to not break the seal. You will possess a scream like a fart in a jar.

The baggie oscillates randomly or unpredictably or probabilistically over your head below you; you cannot still it; every other drop lands on your head, next to never hitting the mark. Still, that means on occasion you continue to erode a hollow into your forehead, in which you take solace. That, and the ants yet work.

You don't have a large bowl filled with liquid handy and if you abandon your stress position to acquire one you might forfeit all you've gained and you could lose the scream in the time it takes you to turn your head over if you do have such a bowl handy on the end table. Maybe a better idea is to, in the moment before your scream, dump the jar contents into your mouth and use the orange piss as the liquid through which the bubble-confined scream must rise without dispersing into the jar inverted on your mouth. But how to prevent excessive leaking of liquid around your mouth before you can screw on the lid, and how to screw on the lid with your mouth inside the wide-mouthed jar mouth? You note that some liquid leakage around your cheek and chin and nose is acceptable, as long as the vapor seal is maintained, and perhaps desirable, to make room for the scream. And you happen to have a plastic baggie in your hand, and plastic stereotypically is impermeable. The plastic baggie, ripped open to make it longer and shoved around the jar lip next to your face, will make an adequate seal.

One of the problems is you can no longer feel your arms. Also, your buttocks are on fire and your quads are jelly. You fight to not collapse or lose consciousness.

You're not sure yet how to replace your face beneath the scream-filled and urine-stoppered jar with the lid without losing the scream. Will the scream rise in air? If you remove your face and the urine falls out, will the scream cling to the top of the jar? Will the urine plug not fall out because of the low pressure or perhaps vacuum created above it as it falls from the overturned jar? Can a scream exist in a vacuum? Perhaps there is a simpler solution. You will punch your face out of the way and screw on the lid in one deft motion with the same hand. Trapping the scream and some of the urine in a jar. You are a capable individual.

You stare into the light without acknowledging you or the ants or the drips. As if you are not here. Are you conscious? If you are not aware of the possibility of dripping water boring a hole into your forehead, will you be driven to scream

as it does so? Still the ants work. The ants will cause pain. The ants will not fail you. The ants do not depend on your awareness. If you are unaware of your pain, does your pain exist?

You smell fresh pee, but don't quit to check.

You hold your stress position, on average. You hold, vibrating like a tuning fork, muscles screaming, deep into anabolic respiration, lactic acid concentrations rising, breath wobbly, staring into the light, dripping. You hold into 150.

141.

Close your mouth, dull your senses, smooth what's sharp, untie all tangles, wipe away all dust. This is your real self. Be on the Way without desires or dislikes, benefit or harm, honor or disgrace. Close your mouth.

The five sounds deafen the ear. The five thoughts confuse the mind.

What is the gentlest of all conquers the hardest of all.

Non-action wins over action.

Close your mouth.

When evil has nothing to oppose, it will disappear.

What is most full seems empty, yet it can be emptied forever.

Close your mouth.

Thirty spokes put together make a wheel, but it's in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.

Clay that's shaped will make a pot, but it's in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the pot depends.

Close your mouth.

The truth that can be told is not the real truth.

The truth that can be told becomes untrue immediately.

Close your mouth.

Without leaving your door you know everything under Heaven.

Without looking out your window you know the Way.

For the farther one travels, the less one knows.

Therefore you arrive without going, see without looking, do nothing yet achieve everything.

Open your mouth.

Do not speak.

In the world some are loud and some are quiet, some are quick and some are slow.

Open your mouth.

Release your real self. Release your honey and your ambition and your ants

and your opposition. Sharp and flat harmonize. Because of beauty ugliness exists. Because of ugliness beauty exists.

Open your mouth and be on the Way to 152.

142.

You seep out of a suppurating wound in the gray ground. The three Women of Gray sit on a park bench squawking at each other, seagulls. After an unspecified time of observation, you discern that they squabble over which direction to direct their eye, which is in the center woman's forehead.

- Up --
- Down --
- Right --
- Whose right?
- Our right. We're all facing the same direction.
- I'm facing left.
- You don't know which way you're facing. You can't see.
- I can see me in our eye in your head.
- Turn east --
- I look good.
- The other east --

A cycloptic socket gapes in each of the other two women's foreheads. They are older than your grandmother, gray-haired, gray of face, gray hatted, draped in gray dresses from neck to ankle, each holding an embroidered gray handkerchief, each sprouting gray-feathered wings from their backs. If they are neither seagulls nor women they are swans: husky of body, graceful of neck, small of head, honking.

- Which way is east?
- Which direction are we facing?
- Impossible to say.
- There's no sun.
- Still no sun?
- Still no sun?
- Gray.
- Egad, failing light forever interminable.
- Gray gray gray.
- It's dusk.
- Stop it.

You see no body of water. But you feel like you are outside. All is gray. If there are walls you cannot delineate between them and sky and ground. There is

no horizon. In the shadowless gray, walls could be near or far or nonexistent, the ground could be frying-pan flat or cheese-grater humped or pie-wedge-on-its-side sloped, the sky could be sky or a ceiling barely out of reach or cavernously far above. Calling it sky is an attempt to carve a form into formlessness, to give a nothing a name. The gray, its vast expanse or narrow confines, its distanceless, recedes and crushes you. In the gray is no relief. No contours, no source of light, no perception of depth, no definition of space, no features. There's you ashen in the gray, there's the gray, and there's the Women of Gray.

- It's dawn.
- Shut up already.
- Dusk and dawn have no definition without night and day.
- Thank you for the science lesson.
- It's history --
- It's literature --
- It's twilight --
- It's my turn.
- Not yet --
- Give me --
- Mine --
- Mine --
- Mine --

You forgive them, or try. In this world of gray they have nothing to talk about except themselves and the grayness and their sole possession. They need to natter, to nag, to bicker in order to be, in order to breathe, inhaling to squawk and exhaling while squawking, sharks that must swim to pass water over their gills. You try to let their honking fade into the gray background, but the background is the same as the foreground. You reach out to see if you can touch the gray, if there is in fact a wall or surface near at hand or if the gray is without bound. You touch nothing. Nothing touches you. With your arm outstretched you can barely make out the gray-fogged ends of your fingers. You feel like the gray stone walls of this cell are just beyond your fingertips, just out of reach, just at the tip of your tongue, and you step and touch nothing and the feeling does not change and you step again and touch nothing and the feeling does not change and you step again and who knows how long you would continue stepping into the changeless gray until you made contact with some surface, some other feeling, some limit, forever?, but the Women of Gray's trumpeting soars.

- I saw --
- Something!
- No I --

-- I saw it!
-- No you didn't, the eye is in my head.
-- I can still see through it.
-- Then why do you want it?
-- I mean it's like I can see through it.
-- What did you see?
-- Maybe a different shade of gray –
-- Maybe a ripple in the gray –
-- Maybe a deformity in the gray –
-- Where?
-- Over there?
-- Left or right?
-- Still there?
-- I don't see its absence –
-- Its stillness –
-- It's stillness.
-- Give me the eye and I'll see.
-- What color is it?
-- Gray.
-- Right or left?
-- Yes.
-- I can't see it!
-- The eye is in my head.
-- Let me –
-- Nothing to see.
-- Share!
-- Gray on gray.
-- Mine –
-- Mine –
-- Mine –

When the gray woman on the left reaches up and yanks the eye out of the center woman's head and folds it in her gray handkerchief, all three squawk in unison.

-- The gray!
-- It's black!
-- Where is it?!

The woman on the right reaches across and grabs the handkerchief from the left and switches it with hers, likewise folded. The center woman quickly does the same to the right with her identical handkerchief. This is the moment to

unwrap your head and turn them to stone and grab the eye. But they can't see. Their eye is folded in a handkerchief. Why have you painstakingly dragged this head around by its dreads? In that moment of feeling sorry for yourself, the three women's hands begin to flutter peck snatch, the three handkerchiefs swirl, the hands are seagulls fighting over three oyster shells, one of which contains a pearl. Except the pearl is an eye. At every exchange they caw.

-- Mine!

The Left woman takes the Center's handkerchief while the Center takes the Left's. Right takes Left as Left takes Right. Center takes Left as Left takes Center. Right trades with Center. Right and Left switch; Center and Right switch; Left and Right switch. Left and Center switch and Center and Left exchange and Left and Center take each other's and Center and Left stand with their handkerchiefs and sit down in each other's places. Right and Left bustle to each other's seats and sit. Center goes to Left and butts Left to Center, who shoves Right right off the end of the bench and slides into her spot. The old Right flings herself at Left and pecks her off the bench and claims the Left side of the bench. The old Left leads with her backside and wedges herself into Center. They cluck and collect themselves. In unison each passes her handkerchief one to the left, Left haughtily to Right, Right snootily to Center, and Center politely to Left. They all throw their hands in the air and leave their crisply-folded handkerchiefs in their laps and frenziedly crow or frantically squawk or fundamentally shriek or --

-- Where's my eye?!

Before they unfold their handkerchiefs and one of them inserts the eye and sees you, you step grayly forward and steal the handkerchief from:

The Left. Go to 22.

The Center. Go to 193.

The Right. Go to 3.

143.

The light goes dark. The box is black but for the white burn on your retina that follows wherever you look. You don't see your photon. Shards of glass mist your face, dust your lips, slip in your mouth on your shallow breath. You struggle, you fight, you can't move, you can't breathe. You butt your head against the hardware cloth and shatter your tearful monocle and bleed into your socket. You seize. The flash of the great camera eye above ignites and you see the fallen hammer and broken vial. The eye sees you. All goes white and you go to 2.

144.

The light goes dark. The box is black but for the white burn on your retina that follows wherever you look. You don't see your photon. You struggle, you fight, you can't move, you can't breathe. You butt your head against the hardware cloth and shatter your monocle, showering yourself in tears, and bleed into your socket. You seize. The flash of the great camera eye above ignites and you again see the apparatus in its heightened, excited, non-resting state, the hammer poised over the vial. The eye sees you. All goes white and you go to 145.

145.

White and bright is the narrow fold between life and death. You want to die. Your photon is gone, absorbed by the watching eye or your eye or your hangman's cloak or the interior of your ideal black box. You do not want to continue, but you chose incorrectly and you have no other means to discontinue. You want to scream like you imagine people jumping from tall buildings scream. Cheeks flapping. Like you imagine a rich chubby man screams when cut off in traffic. Red-faced. Like you imagine Molly Bloom screamed Yes. Quietly repeatedly terminating. A scream to turn solid into liquid, to bifurcate before and after. You don't know how to scream. You vomit and reflexively, unconsciously, regrettably spin your head counterclockwise and direct the bile to the side keeping your airway clear even though all you want is for it to clog and for this entrapment to cease, this experience to cease, you to cease, in which case you must choose rightly between the option blooming like a purple iris or white calla lily in your brain. You must choose, you have no choice, you hurtle forward to a split, a Y-junction, a fork in the road and if you do not choose you will split and divide, which is impossible. The prospect of splitting and thereby enduring the results of both choices, experiencing both living in the box and dying in the box, multiplying your consciousnesses instead of eliminating them, besides being impossible, brings to mind hell and/or purgatory, anticipates existential dread, forecasts your inability to cease, and conjectures the depressing possibility that if you succeed in ceasing yourself another you will continue to live trapped in this box where the iris or lily light bloom bursts, where there is already too much light, in this binary existence of white or black, in this moment of be or be not, in this choosing of 0 or 1. 0 is at 154. 1 is at 155.

146.

I am so happy you still have all your fingers, you say as if to a comrade after a long night of libations, What caused the scream?

Your deep well of wisdom radiant as a distant star, you reply,

My West Neighbor hired a gorgon whore siren to sing to

him until his head exploded. Go to 187.
I don't know. Go to 100.

147.

I am sorry I cut off your pinky but let bygones be bygones, water under the bridge, a finger on the floor, and you brought it on yourself, you explain patiently and ask reasonably, What caused the scream?

Reassured by the equanimity of your tone, you reply with the least amount of ambiguity you can muster,

I might remember standing over her with a knife. Go to 188.

I don't know. Go to 102.

148.

Ringing your middle finger with the cigar cutter and holding your dismembered pinky and ring fingers against their sockets as if they still belonged to you, you kneel on one knee and propose, What caused the scream?

Nothing else matters, you tell yourself, none of this has happened, you tell yourself, what happened is in the past and the past does not exist because it is not now, you tell yourself, and focus on the question at hand shaping the now and answer with barely audible honesty,

The universe became self-conscious, aware, as if seeing itself in the mirror for the first time. Go to 189.

I don't know. Go to 104.

149.

Shoving your pinky in one ear and your dripping middle finger in the earhole that's missing its ear and your ring finger up your nose, you scream to be heard over the sound-damping properties of your fingers, What caused the scream?

Unable to hear the question, knowing the question doesn't matter, but compelled to confess an answer to stop the torture, you scream to be heard over your fingers filling your sensory cavities,

You could not, do not, and will never fill my emptinesses. Go to 190.

I don't know. Go to 106.

150.

The solution: you will pour solution after solution from the receptacles on the

side table into your gaping mouth as you initiate your scream, keeping your jar at the ready in your left hand to slam mouth down on your mouth as your scream bubbles forth. You won't worry about the lid; a solution will present itself. Perhaps you will slam the jar mouth down over your mouth with such force that your face will fly downward, head compressed into chair, chair tipping over, while in your downward follow-through you catch the solution-incased scream, hanging momentarily in the air, in the jar and meet the jar lips with the lid you raise fluidly with your other hand so gravity has no time to act. Or you might turn you over on top of the jar and use you as a lid until you figure out a more permanent solution. After turning you over atop the jar, you might remove you from your lower jaw and employ your tongue and the bottom of your mouth as a lid and discard the rest of you. Whatever lid you engineer, you will reproduce and divide the scream like sourdough or yogurt or kombucha or kefir and research its nature and its applications psychological, medical, technological, military, industrial, and economic, and having created a market, sell it.

Your muscles are waves breaking on the beach, sand and rock and jellyfish slurried. You are water in a glass, but the glass is gone. Liquid without vessel. Your arms fall and the baggie of water smacks your forehead and you raise it hastily, afraid of bringing you back to this world unprepared to scream. But you lack the fortitude. Fall and rise, fall and rise, baggie nearly evacuated, dripping everywhere but the target, smacking your forehead. Your shoulders cry; your arms wave. Your moaning torso, fronted by quivering abs and backed by seizing back, has no concern for the perpendicular-to-the-ground sculptural ideal. Your posture can no longer be approximated linearly. Your 90-degree knee angle varies from 30 to 150 degrees and you never knew each of your quadriceps had its own despairing voice. The noise of your failing muscles drowns your thoughts – but you see your mouth opening and closing like a guppy's and you silence your body and prepare for the final solution holding to the moment near at hand when the baggie runs dry and the ants break through and your muscles quit and the scream slips by your lips at 159.

151.

Your East Neighbor's dog won't stop barking. You're not a cat. You attribute his behavior to the nonstop peal of your doorbell. The pizza girl's right thumb depresses your doorbell unrelentingly. All of her leans into the thumb except for her left hand, palm up, fingers splayed, supporting a pizza box boredly. Under your porch light her skin is almost translucent, a frosty window. You see a lot of her skin. There's a black bustiere and a gold lamé jacket and not much else. There is a scream to catch, but what if while you chase the scream, the reason for

the scream sees this young woman with no hair and no skirt to speak of and what you imagine is no underwear on a dark cold winter's night, wholly absorbed in an interminable task, interminable because you know there will be no answer at your door unless you provide it, her pizza vulnerable to, for example, being eaten by one who did not order it and will not pay for it? You wait for you to open the door. You wait for you to pay her for the pizza, to tip her well, to ask her if she'd like a slice of pizza herself, to offer her sanctuary from whatever pursues her, whatever she pursues, some warmth on a cold night, some protection from ambiguous threats, some presence in the emptiness. But you chose to leave your house; you are not inside to open the door; you did not order pizza that you know of. Though you are hungry. You are not going back into your house now, your task barely begun, the night young, you growing older. And what of the awkwardness if you go into your house to answer the door and find yourself there already? And what of the awkwardness if you walk up to your house and answer the door from the pizza girl's side, the outside, where she has waited for a long time believing you ordered a pizza. As you contemplate this inviolable figure on your porch, a stud glinting in her lip and tattooed tears trickling and winding down her left thigh, a car pulls out east of your East Neighbor's house and drives away. Perhaps your presence, your admiring, unwavering gaze, has driven off a stalker, a seducer, a scream inducer. Now, perhaps, is her chance to escape.

To not scare her off you approach silently from behind and tap her shoulder.

-- Excuse me.

She jumps, spins, and yelps, releasing your doorbell, silencing it and the dog.

-- Fuck, man. Didn't hear you coming.

-- Yes, well, the doorbell. Maybe he's not home.

-- Fucker ordered a pizza.

-- Maybe you have the wrong address.

-- Who the hell are you? It's the address in the computer for his phone number and I asked him if this is still his address and he said, Yes, and so this is the address. Fucker won't answer his phone either. Stuck here holding dude's pizza while he sticks his head up his ass.

-- Maybe he stepped out for a moment.

-- Stepped out after he ordered a pizza, before it was delivered?

-- Maybe it was an emergency.

-- Maybe he got maybe'd to death by the ur-maybe-er.

-- I heard a scream.

-- Huh.

-- That's an inappropriate response.

-- You sure?

-- Of the scream I'm sure. I'm not sure of the where, what, when, why, how, or who.

-- Let's bust in there and find out.

-- Maybe we should call the police.

-- The police is my boss. There's only one, and she's old enough to be your mother and it'll take her years to get here and she also was curiously emphatic that this pizza got to this address. Maybe, you conspicuous infection, she discreetly sent me here to investigate.

-- My mother is a goddess of manipulation.

-- He could be dead or dying or about to be dead or about to be dying. He could be enduring unendurable pain. The bad guy could still be in there. Come on.

-- The doors are all locked.

-- How do you know?

-- I'm confident.

-- Then let's put that weirdo walking stick to work, wool man.

-- I'm not sure it was this house.

-- Then why were you lurking over there staring at me?

-- Because I'm hungry. Because I have and haven't had a piece of pizza, and you have a pizza. Because my lip aches from complicated love and yours is adorned with a stud. Because I am sympathetic to cats, having recently been one, and you were making the neighbor's dog bark obnoxiously. Because I just fled a siren medusa whore who threatened to epiphany me to stone and explode my head with her singing scream, and to whose beauty yours is incomparable, utterly other, and a close second. Because I heard a scream and am acting on it, but slowly.

-- Thank you for your forthright response. Did you cause the scream?

-- Not as far as I know.

-- What is your relationship to the scream?

-- Hearer. Detective. Pursuer.

-- What have you thus far detected?

-- Both houses neighboring this house have known screams, but not I suspect the scream I heard and seek and fear and covet. It is unclear to me if I have investigated both houses sufficiently, or at all.

-- I will assist you in your investigation. The next step, logically, is to break into the house before us and deliver the pizza.

You feel trepidation at the base of your neck as well as other places, such as behind your ears or in your nostrils or between your toes or behind your knees or

in your elbow or on your coccyx, you choose, at the prospect of entering your house. But the pizza girl's confidence, along with her frosty skin and studded lip and bald head and dripping tattoos and no skirt to speak of and what you imagine is no underwear and her ice blue eyes, is intimidating, arousing, and confidence inspiring. As lead detective you decide, all on your own, as in independently, exercising free will, to place your fate into the hands of your new sidekick:

-- Allow me to elucidate several choices from which you may now choose. The first, if you are like me, may appeal to your emotions: We forget the scream, write it off as youthful earnestness though I am neither young nor earnest, as lost innocence, though you are neither lost nor innocent, as the byproduct of a struggle to become in relation to the universe, like heat given off by a chrysalis, though I don't know how much heat pupas lose during metamorphosis and we will not change much let alone blossom into butterflies and we are nothing to the universe. But let us be what we could be to each other. Come split this pizza with me. There are millions of screams in the world; let's get to know each other. On the other hand, we could skip getting to know each other and get out of this town and embark on a journey to unknown countries of exotic creatures and universal ideas, chase a mythical scream and perpetuate heroic adventures, and slay said scream, perhaps repeatedly. To begin living our story, we need only steal this person's West Neighbor's retrofitted biodiesel ambulance parked in front of his house, as neither you nor I, inexplicably for a detective and a pizza delivery girl, appear to possess an automobile. Or thirdly, we could enter this unnerving, forlorn, and dark house, of whose occupant we know nothing but doubt, the entering of which could be against the law and self-incriminating for more reasons than you can imagine, to investigate the impetus of an admittedly disturbing scream I think I heard, and maybe die, and maybe find the owner of this pizza, which you really shouldn't trouble your hairless head over, as it would be my pleasure to take it off your hand. Your choice. What do you say?

-- Fuck this guy, we should definitely eat his pizza. I'm gonna ignore the rest of your subtext. Your salacious is my creepy, so just keep your mouth shut and follow me to 126.

-- Fuck this town. Adventure it is. No need to steal that ex-ambulance, it's mine. That West Neighbor gave it to me a few nights ago when I delivered his pizza and he touched me and I kneed him in the right testicle. After he could speak again, he said that's not what he paid me for, and I said, You paid for a pizza. He said, I thought you

were the hand-tossed supreme. I kneed him in the left testicle. He couldn't scream because he couldn't breathe and he couldn't apologize because he couldn't breathe. He writhed for some time, but eventually, to expiate his mistake, he gave me the keys to his ride. Come on to 128.

-- Fuck you. You are so not my type. I mean besides the obvious like your age and body type and all the wool and you say you were a cat. But you so need my help or you're gonna totally fuck this investigation and never find the scream and never expose the suffering it caused or that caused it and do nothing to ameliorate existence or improve the plight of humanity, not to mention perhaps save a human life inside this house. Give me that walking stick, woolen pussy, we're busting into 124.

152.

You open your mouth. You are not your mouth, but you open it by bursting open this skin. You rip a hole in this shell, create a great cavity in the head through which erupts your real self. Your emptiness pours out, nothing gushes. Behind the nothing, your voice will spray. When the last drop purges, when the last exhalation spumes through your taught vocal chords and abandons your dead earthly form in a screaming affirmation of life, you will feel no pain, you will be done with body, you will be expelled emptiness, an energy transmitted, a scream in the night, eternal and ephemeral, you will be the mouth-agape way in 160.

153.

You lick yourself once, then jump onto the top of the slat fence that separates your yard from your West Neighbor's and walk its narrow line, your belly swaying between your legs. Your tail is erect to show us your asshole because you're bored. You jump onto a tree branch. You dislike cats and you are one. Your nose is up. You are probably the orange and black-striped kind, the wannabe tigers, but you decide what you want. You don't know if you care. The tree is an oak in winter. Forking upward to the dull glow of civilization drowning stars in the night sky. Without its lobed leaves to fractally repeat the forking. You jump up to another branch and another and another, along which you walk toward your West Neighbor's black-lit window, open a crack even in winter. A diaphanous curtain ripples in the draft. Through the curtain you see only a

diffuse undulating purple. You point your butt at it and knead the branch with your front paws and laze your gaze below. Your yard is chickens and dead beans on the trellis and dead peas on the trellis and dead zucchini vines on the trellis, and defunct grapes and raspberries and hops on the trellis, and frozen solid pendulous orbs of winter squash on the trellis. An ambiance of brown wilt and rot. Your West Neighbor's yard too is ninety-five percent dead, it is winter, but it is manicured and coiffed and hip, leaves raked into the freshly shaved bikini line of slumbering flower beds; topiary tight and up-to-date, shrubbery shaped into hands reaching out of the ground or wings opening or pelvis bones protruding; a central pond frozen, elliptical, gaping, brimming, probably like a mouth but difficult to differentiate from other orifices. He must have a gardener. Either you cannot afford the upkeep or you prefer to do it yourself or the garden style that most naturally exemplifies you is rustic and rough-around-the-edges and decaying or all of the above. Your garden is the better litter box. In your backyard, the dog splits his attention between the cooing chickens ensconced in their coop and sounding the alarm at a pizza delivery girl wearing an immodestly short skirt and a gold lamé jacket that accentuates your eyes, a stone blinging in her lip, her bald crown gleaming, her pizza box poised on her upraised hand, relentlessly ringing your doorbell.

You slink in your West Neighbor's window at 136. Recognizing that this is almost positively your last chance to defend your property and/or claim a pizza you did not order and someone else will have to pay for, and that the dog is distracted and unlikely to harass you, and that women with no hair and no skirts to speak of are often fond of cats, and that you cannot be certain there's a greater likelihood of finding information about what happened or evidence leading to a scream's permanent detention without trial in the purple bedroom than in her pizza box, you slink to her 151, descending the same way you ascended.

154.

From white to black. Unilluminated by the glow on your retina or in your brain or from your memory. You shut your eye and what you see does not change. Your body goes rigid and involuntarily your back arches and gagging you throw your face up at the tiny round one-way window into your cage, breaking your nose, shredding your tongue as you try to push it through the hardware cloth like mashing a potato or crushing strawberries or pressing a clove

of garlic, to lick the eye and gnaw and chew it off, but before you succeed the light lights and your tongue burns and you've bitten off your shredded tongue. The arch in your back collapses. You shiver though it is not cold. You gasp in an ice-choked river. Into 157 the light sees you and you see the light.

155.

From white to black. Unilluminated by the glow on your retina or in your brain or from your memory. Glass shards glaze you and slivers slip into your eye. You shut it and what you see does not change but hurts more. Your body goes rigid and involuntarily your back arches and gagging you throw your face up at the tiny round one-way window into your cage, breaking your nose, shredding your tongue as you try to push it through the hardware cloth like mashing a potato or grating cheese or grinding cinnamon, to lick the eye and gnaw and chew it off, but before you succeed the light lights and your tongue burns and you've bitten off your shredded tongue. The arch in your back collapses. You shiver though it is not cold. Into 2 the light sees you and you see the light.

156.

This room is L. L may be an office filled with bodies. Perhaps it's an office with a window, a corner office with two windows, an important office high in a tower with a stunning view that simultaneously bestows self-importance and obliterates it, an internal office with no window like a closet. The bodies are stacked floor to ceiling. The possibility of a window is irrelevant. Perhaps it's a cubicle over the walls of which you could see into other cubicles, see coworkers, see people like you performing the same rote repetitive mundane tasks as you. If that's what it is, that's not what it is now. It is bodies stacked floor to ceiling. The only space not filled with bodies is the T path just wide enough for your body that connects the three entrances or exits to connecting passages. The office smells of rotting humanity but the bodies you see are fresh. You conjecture that if you were to dig through the bodies they might grow older and more rank and decomposed and maggot infested in layer upon layer until you reached the stone wall of the chamber if such a wall can be reached and adjacent to said wall if it exists the bodies would cease to be bodies but would be decomposed melted evaporated compressed to nothing by the pressure of the layers of bodies constantly replenished with fresh bodies from the passages. It could be the monster's storehouse or root cellar or larder for when he's hungry. It could be the bottleneck where those before you quit relinquished themselves died faced with how many before them have failed. The bodies are emaciated or corpulent and

light or dark and blue or purple and ashen and rigid or flaccid and muscular or limp and undefined. All as naked as you. All covered with ventral and dorsal abrasions. Noses worn away. Bald patches on the backs of their heads. Mouthfuls of flesh have been torn from some of the bodies on the surface. You were hungry for pizza. Now you are hungry. From the bottom of the stack you select a body whose face is turned away from you and pull off an arm. There would be more meat on the thigh but you're not sure if you have the strength to remove the leg and the thigh is adjacent to a defunct sexual organ and an excretory organ from which the excrement has been squished out. You bite into the biceps where a bite has already been taken because it's easier. It takes a while for you to take the bite gnawing and ripping and tearing and tossing your head while grappling with the arm to hold it still. You become frustrated with your inability to take a bite of the raw muscle but in your frustration you let go restraint and with abandon rip off a chunk of meat. You chew and chew. Your jaws tire. You lap a daub of thick blood that leaked when you fought the arm but there isn't much. You don't think it tastes like chicken but you've never eaten raw chicken and you never ate much chicken besides because until now you were always careful to not consume mass-produced industrial factory-grown meat. The skin rips easily the muscle does not. You hold the soft hand up so the arm dangles to improve your access to the tidbits of biceps hugging the bone. You move on to the triceps. You'd eat the forearm too but this individual had weak forearms and it isn't worth the work. This person did not work labor. This person did not work with their hands. A faint taste of spoilage but it could be spoilage by association or you projecting the spoilage onto the arm from the general aroma of decay in the office. Until your hunger is slaked you are hungry enough to not think about how you eat another human another animal much like yourself an animal that could be you when another enters the office. Your hunger is slaked. You hope to never see a mirror again. Back in against the torso you tuck the arm bared to humerus and tendons and yet a few shreds of muscle from shoulder to elbow. Undamaged from elbow to fingertip. You admire the construction of the elbow the hinge joint where three bones meet the splay of nerves the grip of tendons the change in motion the pressure endured. You step to the intersection in the middle of the bodies. Post-its dangle from the fingertips of hands on arms akimbo above each of the three available fissures of egress through the bodies. You have more person in you but you feel like less of one. But you now have the energy to continue as these voided lives these office dwellers this fodder did not. You must choose before the monster arrives and turns you into one of them.

If you go east you writhe a forever of forevers with your

act and come full circle and believe you are who you were and arrive at 142.

If you go west you scuttle unable to forget twice forever to 54.

If you go south you wriggle forever with heartburn to 50.

157.

The white light is bright and you don't know if your eye is open or closed and when will you die? Maybe the relay between your choice of state and the executing mechanism is malfunctioning; electrons could be going haywire in your black box brimful of you like free electrons in the face-centered cubic or hexagonal close-packed lattice of a metal; you've never had much truck with technology. You twitch, a dissected frog bound by alligator clips dancing at a puppeteer's charge. Haven't you screamed enough? Have you screamed at all? If your eye is open the light is outside you. If your eye is closed the light is inside you. You have still never heard a scream but you have felt the vibration and smelled the exhaust, the perfume, the fume, the corrosion, the pollen, the pollution and felt the disturbance in the electromagnetic field like a shark and tasted the seal and honey and salt and lemon and chalk and MSG, you've tasted the bilious scream that folded you in on your central vacancy, you've smelled the scream that made you come so completely you collapsed, that incited your empathetic, claustrophobic tears, you've felt the scream that aroused aching unrequited longing, that adrenalized you into a superhuman, that flayed you like an Aztec child. All those sensations, emotions, accomplishments are in the past and insufficient now. Something more is being asked of you and you don't know by who and you don't know the question except it's bright and you don't want to answer because it's pointless and your choice will be arbitrary and there is no difference between answering in your head or from your mouth and you cannot speak, never could, and you have no tongue and your mouth is full of blood, as is your nose, and you are in a box, and even if you have been screaming, you are, must have been, must be, you are thoroughly beyond knowing, you aren't, can't be, with the blood in your mouth, with the gagging and the aspirating and the coughing, the reflexing, the choking on the impossibility of dying, the unconscious the body refusing to asphyxiate, the conscious the you longing for the hammer and the shatter of glass and the gas and then to not continue, to be done, black out, to not go back to the fork and follow the path of the living as if you never broached the path of the dead, but the will to live lurks biding its time and you cannot move your arms or your hands or your legs or your feet or your

torso but enough to smash you face against the inside of the top of the box, which does not change the intensity of the light, which is not going away, not until you mouth or think or decide if your eye is open at 162 or closed at 163, open and closed is not an option, if you choose both are you still one but now with two eyes, one open and one closed, or are you two, one of you with an eye open and one with an eye closed?, and is this question the question the light asks of you or does the light solely demand you answer an unspecified indeterminate either/or question of your choosing in order to evaluate you and the question you choose instinctively, accidentally, thoughtlessly investigates the light's nature by trying to determine if it is in you or out by first determining if your eye is open or closed? Either way, it is the question. It could be the question that finally enables you to suicide.

158.

-- I'm calling back about the scream.

-- No, we're calling you back about the scream.

-- But I dialed and you answered --

-- You answered. We do not provide answers, only evidence. We facilitate you ...

-- Answering?

-- Good. We dialed and you answered. If you also dialed and we answered then ...

-- It must've been one of those weird things, those trippy happenings, those cosmic alignments, those intersections of separate worlds. We dialed each other and answered concurrently, at the exact same moment, mirroring each other.

-- Congratulations. You'll make a fine detective chasing the scream. We're retiring before the market economy pigs blow the rest of our pension. Going to live the good life, high in the heather, knee deep in shit, on the fat of our --

-- But I'm not qualified.

-- We just trained you.

-- I won't do it.

-- You quitting on us, Quitter?

-- I ... it's just ... I don't think I can do it.

-- Listen, we're sorry. It's just ... we have liver cancer, so we must retire, or we'll die without having retired. Which is sad. All the potential time unrealized. All the saved money unspent. All the potential leisure unenjoyed.

-- But can I do it?

-- Of course you can. Believe in yourself a bit. If you don't, nobody will, and you'll cease to exist. Possibly with some dwindling before cessation, but don't go

that rout. Believe in yourself. You're doing a formidable job as a detective already. The scream called to report that you were harassing it.

-- But I haven't even left the house --

-- We suggest that in the future you never use that whiney tone. There is no need to defend yourself. Another officer, one of us, is investigating the scream's claims and protecting the scream from you, until we retire. Which will occur simultaneously with you becoming one of us, an imminent occurrence, approximately now, at which point you will be the sole officer due to budget constraints. At which point you will have free choice to do what you will. For now, we don't know what you've done to that scream -- she or he was so high strung and loud and inflectionless when he or she called that we couldn't gather whether the harassment of which you are accused was physical or emotional or psychological or sexual or existential or quantum or purely auditory. Regardless, keep up the good work. Just mind the line between self-belief and assault, for if you determine that you've crossed it, you'll have to arrest yourself.

-- I don't want to be the cops.

-- It's your civic duty. Do you think we wanted to be the cops? Does society police itself? We married into it, then we divorced and we were still in it. Do you have a car?

-- I think so.

-- Good. You need to come pick up your pizza and deliver it to yourself. And deliver all the other pizzas to everyone else.

-- Can it take the miles? It needs a new alternator or starter or water pump or oxygen sensor or muffler or wiper blades or u-joint or -- I get lost in this town, my hometown, every time I step out the front door.

-- You'll never be bored. That's not true, but you'll be overemployed in an understaffed position in the service industry -- there are no other jobs but service jobs: nurses, waitresses, artists, police, politicians, custodians, scientists, engineers -- there will always be something else you should be doing in addition to what you are doing, there's not enough time, whether or not you're doing something you should be doing, and let us tell you, that constant numbing pressure of there always being something else you should be doing offers little incentive to do what you should do because even if you do what you should do there will be something else you should be doing. We have a note here that says you need to call your mother.

-- Mom?

-- This is a good job. We don't know if you'll be good at it. You should've known it was us at the imminent sound of our yet-to-be-heard voice. But it doesn't matter how good at it you are. The job has a pension if you live to use it

and if the porcine financial gods don't squander it on video games.

-- But you're just the pepperoni slicer and sausage grinder and canadian bacon importer and anchovy catcher.

-- We've been leading double and triple and quadruple and more lives for a long time. They promoted me from meat maiden to pizza making to pizza delivery, and then to sexual gratification delivery, and then to gratification delivery, and then, after you were delivered, to mother calling enforcer, and from there into law enforcement, from police to cop to detective. But we still do it all. We're taking my liver cancer to Baja in search of last margaritas and beached whales to save. Give that scream hell. Come pick up your pizza, baby, and take our job. What else do you do all day? Besides fumble around under hens for eggs? Lots of ladies ordering pizzas these days. Deliver a few pizzas, be a private dick, and you won't have to keep calling prostitutes. You'll acquire a wife, which you may have already, we don't know, you never call, and make grandchildren if you haven't. Don't keep making the most boring choices.

Anointed a detective, you take matters into your own hands and go to your West Neighbor's at 181.

While vacillating between taking the job and not, you call the only person left to call, your East Neighbor at 127, unless you've already called him, unless you want to endure the same goddamn conversation over and over.

You chose to follow the phone track, to attempt to neutralize the scream by utilizing this implement of communication, and you won't quit now, despite the repetition of cop-calling and the possibility of having a conversation you have already had and the temptation of your mother's job. Call the cops at 37, hoping for a different result, hoping your mother doesn't answer.

Incapacitated by the prospect of becoming your mother, you disconnect the phone so she won't call you drunk from Baja and go to 11.

159.

Your mouth opens and your chance opens and the eerie sensation of something slippery, an eel, slips into your ear, an otherworldly seep beyond hearing slipping from your parted lips below you, your ultrasound slipping from you and penetrating your consciousness, but it is not a scream, no, though it gives you chills you quell. You decide it is a scream's precursor. And before the ants, delivered to your throat via the Eustachian highway, spew out propelled by a scream already dissipating, already escaped, already lost to you, you discard

the baggie like a spent rubber and recline the chair fully and grab the empty honey jar in your left hand and invert it and instead of the jar of orange urine grab a pint glass of yellow liquid and dump it in your mouth which fills and overflows and slam the inverted jar over the orifice. Yellow liquid dribbles down your neck. Liberated from your position, your adrenaline surges and your muscles crack and your blood leaves your head and you are floored by a head rush, momentarily losing consciousness like an unprecedeted orgasm except worse. You come to and right yourself and catch the previously inverted jar as it falls from your mouth before it shatters. Before you sputter all the liquid out you pour a tumbler of what you hope is whiskey neat into your gurgling mouth, yes breath yet escapes, chased by a Nalgene of water smelling of vodka. The liter of liquid gives you time. You calm. Fluid cascades from your mouth. No need to rush. You are captive. You're not moving or thrashing or screaming or spouting out the fluid, which continuously leaks from the corners of your mouth. Occasionally the placid pond in your mouth is disturbed by rising, bursting bubbles. This could yet take a while; have your inverted jar at the ready but don't be premature. You slow the rate of fluid application, careful to maintain the vapor block between your larynx and the open air. You slowly pour jars of pale or glowing or green liquid, white, orange, or apple-juice-colored liquid, mud brown liquid, oily viscous liquid, or thin mercurial liquid into your mouth. You slowly become astounded by your stamina, your tenacity, your will. But you too are tenacious. There are signs of progress, reasons for hope, if you are attentive. Your eyes, staring vapidly into the light, gradually protrude as the pressure of a scream rises within you. A slight shake of the head, a sloshing of liquid, turbulence in the pond. Movement. Negation, defiance, a sign of fight, a sign of life. You set the trap jar down on the paper-slopped desk within easy reach and tuck the blanket tight around your arms and fingerless hand and atrophied legs. You break a pencil in half and prop open your mouth, eraser to palette, jagged end pinning tongue to mouth floor, in case you had the notion or reflex to close it. You kneel, clamp your one-eared head in your arm, and slowly pour mystery liquid into your mouth through a veil of silence and wait to 166 for the one mighty bubble.

160.

You cannot squeeze out your mouth and you open it wider but it cannot open wider and the mighty wind in your lungs is trapped, the exit blocked and now – you can never know now but now is the only time you know – now some foul burning liquid sneaks around your epiglottis and you need to cough more than anything you've needed in your life but you do not – you will exit and expand

from this life with grace – you choke it down though your eyes water and you see white light all around and it doesn't stop, the impulse to cough goes on and the inability to exhale yourself fluidly continues and you cannot move your head or your arms or your legs or any of the body parts you distanced yourself from and were finally at the point of abandoning and despite your separation from your body you lose control of it and gag and sputter and see night creeping in on the edge of the light and the image of death in a dark cloak with a bent stick approaching and though you still have the wherewithal to discard the dark figure as an irrelevant cultural artifact nevertheless the darkness creeps in and the light shrinks and you try to not care to be unattached to release your desire to live because that is the way to heaven but your heart thumps and might explode and more sweet and salty and sour and toxic and burning liquid slips into your lungs and you gag and cough and spasm and vomit simultaneously everything all of you are one with nothing but your fluid projection from your mouth – you go out not as a sigh or a scream but a hurl – into the face of 166.

161.

Before arriving at your East Neighbor's East Neighbor, you encounter the old Volvo diesel station wagon in front of your East Neighbor's East Neighbor's house. The Volvo runs or chugs or idles, warming its interior, warming its exterior with its exhaust. Outside it is not warm, which is no indication of the Volvo's contribution to deadening the earth. The fishhook is cold in your lip, deadening the pain. You idly wonder if old rumbling Volvos are sufficiently sound-deadening to mute an internal scream. Well, you think to yourself. You can't walk by the Volvo unnoticed. And if you could (the windows are fogged), you can't come up with an excuse (you could be trapped within while the scream escapes) that deadens your sense of duty (what you supposedly seek could be inside: your East Neighbor's wife's mutilated corpse's scream shut in the Volvo box; or her tenuous consciousness, in need of a Red Cross donation to compensate for the thousands of minute drops of red blood studding her bare body from the fishhook piercings of tantric acupuncture, at the cusp of screaming; or her semi-conscious and not desperate for medical attention but screaming her energy from sausage-smeared chakras as she hovers between this world and an orange) to investigate the Volvo as an object you've noted (among infinite unnoted objects) in your wintry suburban surroundings.

You tap on the passenger window. The door opens. No scream exits the car. The car exhales warm air. You enter, leaving the walking stick outside. On the driver side sits your East Neighbor's wife, who is also your East Neighbor. She does not look at you. She has white hair and shuts off the car. She wipes the

windshield with her sleeve and stares down the road past the houses receding without end, their height decreasing as their distance from you increases until they vanish.

You, the two of you, sit silently. The car smells of tears and lotion and grandmothers and an orange though you see none. The houses beyond the windshield down the road continue to vanish. You sit still and silent and staring ahead for a long time. The windshield fogs. In the presence of this old abused or disabused woman, you feel yourself growing older, and in that way, temporally, over the course of time, you come closer to her.

She ends the silence.

-- Where is the pizza?

-- It's --

-- It's in my house. I know. I ordered it, sausage, and went to pick it up, and some old lady who looked too much like me and a little like you said it was delivered. That twat delivered it with a stud in her lip like the fishhook in yours and no underwear. He probably didn't tip her. I know how you feel, teased along, reeled in, the tension so steady you can't feel the pull in your lip, too steady, you following but you don't know why, going on for what? To have the fishhook extricated and your head cut off? To be married to an outdoorsman trapped indoors who expects to have sex twice a week for decade upon decade? To spawn upstream and float back down dead, bloated, pink? To strive to satisfy an obsessively unsatisfied man until you die? To wash up on a rock, insides open, exposed for a gorging eagle?

-- He saved the pizza for you.

-- I heard a scream. Reminded me of him, your East Neighbor, my husband, in the past, him in the past, a past scream. So much screaming in a life. But this one. He was taking the kids to school and he sent the two oldest out the front door to the car, this car, while he strapped the baby in her baby car seat and locked the doors and set the alarm and didn't feed the dog in case a rat or raccoon or opossum or neighbor or salesman or proselytizer intruded and made sure the stove was off after cooking breakfast and unplugged the lights on the Christmas tree so the Christmas tree wouldn't catch fire and turned off all the other lights to save money and minimize waste and minimize our deadening of the world and grabbed another pacifier or two for when the baby threw hers across the car or hurled it out her mouth screaming and screaming, tongue quivering in her open mouth like a cartoon baby's. When he, the outdoorsman, stepped outside, lugging his baby in her seat, the middle child was crying because the oldest had touched her door and rubbed a patch of her frost off her window. Why all the emotion. I mean, people will hurt you, or they won't and

you'll hurt anyway. Your East Neighbor calmly told the eldest, "I'm not giving you a quarter for popcorn at school." At which the eldest started crying. He got them all in the car and buckled and scraped the frost off the windows. Your East Neighbor knew that by denying his eldest his Friday popcorn he meant to hurt him, probably even to make him cry for making his sister cry, which was the only reason the boy himself had wiped off her frost, it was a soft frost, to hurt, to antagonize, to dig at her. He'd been told by his father to not race ahead of her and put his handprint in her frost or wipe off her dew or touch her door five out of seven days for four months, minus holidays and no-school days, plus weekends and holidays and no-school days when they went anywhere such as the beach or woods or swim lessons; he must have told him to knock off this specific action several hundred times. When the eldest started to cry, your East Neighbor felt both infuriated and sad. Being made to feel infuriated over something so insignificant infuriated him further; being made to deprive his son of a joy when there were so few joys in the world saddened him still further; and being made to feel sad when he was sad so often infuriated him yet further. Still, they had managed to get this far, almost gone from the house, without a screaming match this morning, and your East Neighbor managed to maintain his composure, despite the fact that they were as always running late like everybody. When he got in and started the car, he attempted to alleviate some sadness by saying with considerable volume, but less than a yell, below a scream, "Are you going to keep doing that to be mean to her?" When the boy didn't answer, he yelled the question again. The boy managed a "No." "Then I'll give you a quarter. Are you going to whine about sharing the popcorn with your sister after school?" A whined "No." "Are you going to whine?" "No." But, having chosen to give in, to assuage he and his son's sadness, to go back on what he'd said, that he would give no quarter, to make his words meaningless, infuriated him and he could no longer contain it. His fury overflowed him and his screaming filled the car, pressurizing it, pressing against their four bodies, screaming about how the eldest was not going to do that again, or he was going to start throwing away his toys, how the boy was going to stop doing things just to be mean, stop being an asshole, stop trying to make his sister cry. I wasn't there, but the scream, it still echoes in this Volvo, you can read it in the crumbs in the seat and the fingerprints on the fogged-over windows and the service history scribbled in the notebook in the glove compartment. He screamed half the four-minute drive to school, though it felt much longer to them all. The eldest and the middle stared ahead in silence, cowed. The baby did not join the screaming. Your East Neighbor stopped screaming, his heart thudding, running away from him. He wanted to cry, to run away from himself. He has been known to cry, but he did

not then. While the air still vibrated he said, "I'm sorry for yelling." He knew his apology meant nothing but he had nothing else to say. It was true he was sorry but what good was that after he'd berated his children. He wished he'd made different choices, but then he wished his son had made different choices, or his daughter, his baby hadn't had a chance to make choices yet, though she hadn't screamed, which could have made things worse by adding screams to screams and angering him further by further reducing his claim on his consciousness. He had not been aware as his fury overwhelmed him of making a choice. What was there to do about it now? Regret? It was in the past, and yes he felt regret but what use was it. He could not undo what he'd done. He gave his son a quarter. The popcorn would make them happy later. He said, "I love you." And then, "Put the quarter in your pocket so you don't lose it." And his son got out of the car and entered the school. All I could think of after your East Neighbor told me this story at the end of the day, after I got home from the office, where I'd been engineering a nut for some Chevy, after the popcorn, after my husband drew me a graph of his day with time on the x-axis and his happiness on the y-axis as a visual aid --

She draws the graph into the thick fog on the inside of the windshield: a depressed sinusoid shifted down so it oscillates around a negative number on the happiness scale though the apexes peak above the x-axis. You both breathe heavily. In your wool it's hard to breathe. You feel old, and perhaps you are. You are overheated and her story is beyond riveting, in the front seat of the Volvo, the very Volvo wherein the story occurs, the Volvo still oozing from the pores of its upholstery the long ago scream of a man, a neighbor, a father, a man in a way you may or may not be but may yet become --

-- was, "If that had been the last time he saw him, if he or him died today, the last thing this man who I had, have children with would have said to his eldest and only son was 'I love you', or almost the last thing, the next to last thing, near enough to the last thing, though the next to next to last thing he would have said would have been the slurry of words that when taken as one were one long if slightly modulated scream." I am still thinking about it.

-- He's waiting --

-- But neither of them died that day.

She scoots over on the bench seat and kisses you, her lips paper, her powdered cheek smushing your nose and smelling of tears and lotion and grandmothers, her tongue a sinusoid, the inside of her mouth the pithy inside of an orange peel, the orange disemboweled but the peel whole but for a wormhole through which the empty orange sucks your tongue into the vacuum inside an old steamy diesel Volvo station wagon on a cold winter's night. She unbuttons

your pants and you try to touch her and find where her skin doesn't sag as much as yours, but all your skin is covered in wool, including your fingertips, excluding your face and what she's pulled out of your pants. She squeezes the newly aged, wrinkled, gray, not quite lifeless you in her hands, palpitating, providing external peristalsis, engendering a response, directing your blood flow, and takes the fishhook sticking out of your lip between her teeth and tugs gently, then more forcefully, drawing you atop her.

-- Don't worry, he can't hear a fucking thing.

You do not choose to resist and you do not choose to not resist. You do not choose. You are gone, you've let go, you've surrendered without choosing to, without knowing it, because you are not there, not all of you, though the you that is there is more you in this moment, giving, surrendering, swelling, stretching your skin near to bursting there is so much of you, than can normally be said of it. Your abandon has nothing to do with the scream. You're not thinking of adding to the screams this Volvo has heard, or of retribution for your East Neighbor's past screams, or of exorcising the screams inhabiting an elderly woman who seems to have lived almost her entire life inhabited by her husband's screams, or of capturing another scream in this humid dripping wellmade Swedish box, or of researching if the old scream like the young, or of comparing frustrated father screams with sexual release screams to see if they are separate species or if they can successfully procreate, and if they can if their offspring are sterile or fertile, an attractive combination of the best attributes of both, an improvement, a mule from a donkey and a horse, or a monstrous result, a Minotaur from a bull and a woman, or of conducting thought experiments with screams in order to elucidate an ultimately inconsequential subject. The part of you that is not there is not there, it's elsewhere, not perseverating on this moment or thinking of the Volvo or its contents, leaving the part of you that is there to simply and passionately and enthusiastically and desperately paw and pet and stroke and make love to your East Neighbor and for once in your life, finally, in your dotage, climax. She stops, pushes you off her, pulls back, lowers her skirt, hikes up her stockings, poofs out the muss in her hair, reapplies an excessive amount of salmon-colored lipstick, and puts the great length of the bench seat between your erect and incomplete sexual organ and her discreet and internalized one. She smooths her blouse and looks at you and your projection pointing at the sky, at the dashboard or the windshield or the sun visor or the ceiling, the silent and needy you overly sensitive to the steam currents in the Volvo and aching to be enveloped.

-- You taste like my husband. The barb of his fishhook sticks out of your lip and draws blood from my cheek when we kiss and you don't notice. You've been

eating my sausage pizza. You are no different than your East Neighbor. You'll want to trade in my diesel Volvo station wagon after we consummate all of its seats, front and rear and further rear, driver, passenger, and middle, after we sire our first born in it. You are older than you used to be. I've decided to not start over again for the same thing. If nothing else, he thinks he loves me, and I'm used to how he makes me scream, and the less he hears, the more compatible we become. And I don't know what you are, but he's an outdoorsman.

She takes her keys from the ignition, opens her door, and lets herself out and the cold air in.

-- I'm a detective, you say. I love your Volvo --

She slams the door on your words. You wait until you can zip up your ache. You exit the Volvo. Your East Neighbor's footsteps in the frost lead west to your East Neighbor's front door. You go east to 132.

162.

White turns black and still you are not dead. Why always the time delay -- thought and action, action and consequence, thought and consequence, consequence and cause, cause and chance, chance and effect, effect and cause, cause and choice, choice and death, death and birth, birth and death, now and now -- a time delay blooming on your brain, a white afterimage, your retina's overexcitement, a negative shadow not in reality existing in your box with you, not in this reality, this iteration of buried alive in a quantum suicide box, though it may as well be because the afterglow is all you see even though you decided your eye is open, but wait, there, now, or recently the ghost image begins to fade, wither, but you know in your perennial spring of reason that the ghost will in a flash of creation blossom again and you hate knowing it, knowing the future, you want to not know it -- light, time, expectation, hope, despair will cycle on and on until you are dead -- how did you fuck up so bad that you're buried while conscious, thoughtful while tongueless, suicidal while incapacitated, stuck between life and death or oscillating between life and death or both alive and dead? have you done more harm than good? are you a victim of a bad roll of the dice? how imperfectly have you loved? what do you leave behind? -- you despise your self-knowledge -- if you're a rat in a cage you don't want to know you're a rat in a cage -- and you rail ineffectually against the inside of the box and the light lights and you seize and twitch like a subatomic particle oscillating between states, mouth frothing, tongue root rigid, cold sweating, soiling yourself, nauseated by this inescapable brightness that is not diminished by eyelid, sentenced to box after box after box, the same old box recreated at each flash, the next at 164.

163.

White turns black and still you are not dead. Why always the time delay -- thought and action, action and consequence, thought and consequence, consequence and cause, cause and chance, chance and effect, effect and cause, cause and choice, choice and death, death and birth, birth and death, now and now -- a time delay blooming on your brain, a white afterimage, your retina's overexcitement, a negative shadow not in reality existing in your box with you, not in this reality, this iteration of buried alive in a quantum suicide box, though it may as well be because the afterglow is all you see even though you decided your eye is closed, but there, here, finally a fine dusting of glass in your mouth on the heels of which swishes an evaporating mist that you lap and inhale and relish and speechlessly beseech to function and as you wait reflective regret visits like your photon -- how did you fuck up so bad that you're buried while conscious, thoughtful while tongueless, suicidal while incapacitated, stuck between life and death or oscillating between life and death or both alive and dead? have you done more harm than good? are you a victim of a bad roll of the dice? how imperfectly have you loved? what do you leave behind? -- and winks out as quickly but you are still buried alive and what if the light lights and you do not die, what if your state perpetuates, what if the vapor does not deliver oblivion, and you rail ineffectually against the inside of the box and the light lights and you seize and twitch like a subatomic particle oscillating between states, mouth frothing, tongue root rigid, cold sweating, soiling yourself, nauseated by this inescapable brightness that is not diminished by eyelid, sentenced to box after box after box, the same old box recreated now with the vial broken in a flash to 2.

164.

You pray you're not immortal. If that fucking light goes out again ... but the light is fading, the white washing away, photons innumerable draining down the sink ... you were about to say you'll scream, but fuck the scream, a scream's not enough and you don't know how or you don't know if you know how because you cannot hear it. You'll do something though, even if this diabolical box says you cannot, says with walls instead of words. You cannot play this game anymore, this experiment, this continuing to live while dying. You are not immortal; life is not forever thank God. But you can't help your doubt. You have after all almost certainly died at least once, and probably more, three times perhaps, and yet here you are. Alive. But the dying yous are dead deceased ceased and the only you here now continuing is you. Right? Nevermind that you remember the dying, the white light and all that. The you that lives on is the you

that has chosen to live on, you think, even if you did not know life is what you chose, choose, again and again and again. And if this life is the one you chose, if this reality is yours, chosen now and now and now always chosen, then you choose to decide some defining aspects of your reality. You decide you are not in a box. And if not all of you endorses this decision, if not all of you is on board with this choice, if not all of you can understand or believe or explain with physical laws to your satisfaction that you can determine at least some characteristics of your reality, then you let that you go, rather you let that you stay to flip the coin of life and death, heads life tails death or heads death tails life, or both it doesn't matter because you cannot know except in retrospect, and retrospection is theorizing about a time not now -- you take too long and don't get out of the box in time: Heads or Tails. Darkness. Light. Death. Life. You try again. You let the you who believes in the power of your arbitrary choices remain -- no. You let the you who believes in the arbitrariness of your choices remain buried alive in the box to endure the flash and fade. You, the you who believes in something else, the incomplete arbitrariness of your choices at least, choose to be a you not in this box without exit, with no space, with less and less air to breathe, with light filling you and burning your retina and abandoning you to a more complete darkness and a dancing negative again and again. Whoever or whatever or whomever or whyever has put you in this box can fuck off, go to hell, you're not a guinea pig or a lab rat or a mouse in a maze or a monkey learning human language, you're not an experiment in attaining multiple consciousnesses or quantum immortality. You don't need to break open the unbreakable lid, you don't need enough distance to accelerate your foot and shatter a wall, you don't need space to pry with your hooked walking stick, you don't need another's constraint, you don't need to explain, you don't need to engage in discourse, you don't need a tongue. You are not in the box.

Fine. Where are you. You don't get to decide everything. You cannot leave where you've been behind and start over as an erased slate -- you are who you've been, what you've done, where you've been, why you've done what you've done. You leave you behind but you cannot leave you behind. Fine, you are outside of the box. Looking down on it, yet closed. It looks like a box, fine, a coffin, but not an ornate coffin, an elongated tapered simple black box from the lid of which snakes a twist of wires. The lid is locked shut. In a sterile room. White tile. A metal table. On it a computer, a screen to which the wires connect. Next to the computer a magnifying glass. Next to the magnifying glass, a handheld personal mobile digital computing communication device, or a smartphone, itself another screen, a touchscreen, tethered to the computer wirelessly or by a cord. On the smartscreen a picture of you in the box, face contorted, a trickle of blood from

your closed mouth, frozen in time. Still. Dead? You don't open the box to find out. You look at your picture on the small screen with the magnifying glass. You look bigger. On the computer screen are two graphs: one of decibel vs. time, one of frequency vs. time, both scrolling in real time, both hovering near zero, nearly flatlining, but with slight jumps as you shuffle, breathe, and pace the room. The coffin is incompletely isolated from external vibrations. In the room is space to pace. The room you somehow recognize. A room that feels familiar, like you've been in it, like you were just here. Feels like *déjà vu* you've had before. Nothing but you is alive in the room, except perhaps the you in the box, and there is nothing to watch but the screens, except for a fat cat which is presumably also alive watching you while licking itself in the cheap office chair before the table and screens and magnifying glass. The cat watches you with either disinterest or disdain. Unaffected by your presence and continuing to lick itself as always, or licking itself as a coping mechanism, a distraction from the incongruity of you being in and out of the box, in the coffin box and in the handheld smartscreen box and in the room box, or licking itself anew to further the entertainment your arrival promised but inadequately provides. You do not attempt to pet the cat. You've had mixed experiences petting cats. You like cats about as much as they like you. You appreciate their mousing abilities. You do not wait for your next iteration in the box, on the screens, to discover if the captured image of you changes or if you register a scream on the recording device. You do not scroll back through past photos or audio recordings or their graphical representations. You want out of the boxes or you might scream. You leave behind the devices, handheld, desktop, feline, quantum, Russian-doll-ish, smart, boxy, terminal, forking-paths-like. You open the door, there's a door, every room has a door or there's no way in, no way to be put in unless it is built around you and you are trapped going nowhere forever or you carry it with you always, to 168.

165.

Is this a little like enhanced interrogation?, you ask yourself hypothetically, ask rhetorically, ask like the man undergoing enhanced interrogation asks, Why do you continue to hit me when I am unconscious? To make the hypothetical real, you answer you, You've put yourself in the Labyrinth, which consists of numerable choices, to discover yourself, to investigate your secrets, to determine what kind of person you are. Also, you add, you thought it looked like a likely place to get lost and thereby find a scream. Relating the first two answers, you answer thirdly, At the time of conception, when you built the Labyrinth around yourself, it appeared to be a rectilinear, clearly-defined, limited space in which to determine under what conditions you scream. You'd go on answering but you,

declaratively hit and interrogatively hitting, know the answers you give are lies misdirections fictions nonsense fabricated to appease you and stop the interrogation. You drag you through the passage, yes like paper dolls, like convicts shackled together, like Siamese twins joined at finger and toe tip, squirming through a birth canal, yes, fine, a vagina, go there, in or out, you are a private detective, a private eye, a private dick in a stone vagina too tight and unlubricated and which you may have entered the wrong way, your sheep or alpaca or llama wool condom worn to threads, your head bouncing behind you like a disinterred testicle, like whatever. You're bored with these passages. With the explanations. With expressing yourself like a nipple. They're all the same. The same tight fit, the same scraping, the same desperation, the same claustrophobia, the same narrative arc of woe is me I'm lost my god I'll never make it I'm going to die and go on and on and then make it to the next chamber, the same fear, the same reversal of Is a monster coming or am I the monster?, the next dumb choice you're supposed to map, a manufactured impediment, another hoop to jump through when a map could easily be provided. But you remind yourself you never would have entered the Labyrinth with a map; a map makes a labyrinth pointless; the map is the Labyrinth; by making the map you make a labyrinth. The maplessness is part. The boredom is part. The repetition ad nauseam are part. The manufacture, the choice and choicelessness, the talking to yourself, the endurance test are all part. Without the parts you haven't a whole; without the parts you haven't the machine. In a chamber you choose again by torchlight whether you like it or not:

If you turn north, then slip forever to 50.
If you turn west, then scuttle forever to 130.
If you turn south, then wriggle forever to 40.

166.

You projectile vomit up into your face. The torrent hurls you back clear of the chair; the jagged pencil surfs the foul wave, bounces off your forehead, and breaks skin if not impales itself. The bubble burst, you are not everywhere, you are fully within yourself sputtering, hacking in the chair, wracked by coughs, expelling breath infused with piss and liquor and bronchial chunks, unable to scream, and you are crouched on the floor behind you, dry heaving, all the filth you poured in your mouth mixed with your bile dripping from your hair and chin and the inside of your burning nose, from your burning eyes, from your gagging mouth. Lungs clearing, aftershocks subsiding, you regain control of this body you inhabit, this shuddering shell with strained abdominals and possibly a broken rib from coughing and a burning nasal passage and rattling alveoli and a

sore throat, a body five-fingered and one-eared and absent the strength to break the binds of an old blanket tucked into the cushions, a body whose heart may be broken and whose blood may only be circulating by the action of the calf compression cuffs and whose trembling you cannot calm and whose brain twitches, awareness shrinking from the light, neurons misfiring in an attempt to pretend it is not here. A body that now shuts its eyes against the light, though you feel the photons pouring on you. From this body in which you are trapped, you try to scream. You gurgle and return to coughing. The scream you ache to scream is not the scream you were about to scream before you waterboarded yourself, but a limp imitation. You'd slander it with the epithet of Repetition if there were an original to repeat and thereby diminish. The scream in you now is not a transcendent scream. You no longer have the capacity for your original scream. You no longer have the breath for your imitation scream. You nearly drowned but did not. You no longer believe in the epiphany and transcendence of which your scream was to be indicatory, no, with which your scream was to transport you. Therefore you cannot produce it. You can cough. You coughing on your hands and knees behind you dripping your regurgitations and heaving and failing to reproduce your reflux hears you cough a cough that sounds slightly different than a cough, unique, a higher pitch slung within, a desperate expectoration, an expulsion of life, a sign of life, a note that if you were describing it to a mechanic you'd call a whine, a frequency hard to hear unless you know what to listen for, no, more than a whine, nearly a shriek, much weaker than a scream but deepened with suffering and endurance and disappointment and self-torture and failure and unrequited hope and near death experience and futility, and in response the mechanic might say maybe you need new belts, and you'd say no, no, this is no slipping belt or rat under the hood or wrench in the gears, this is it, what I've longed for and dedicated my life to and fought for for so long, and you reach reflexively with your left hand for the jar but it is not there. Rather, you're not there, you're on the floor, the jar is beside the chair on the desk with all your business papers. You're a wretch on the floor and if you want to call what you just heard from yourself a scream you can, you can expand the definition of the word, of the sound, of its content, you can call it whatever you want, because it's another scream gone, another reverberation in your mind, your jar is empty, you missed it, too busy dry-heaving and coughing in time with yourself. Progress past your futility to 170.

167.

It is difficult turning the coldslick doorknob while wearing gloves. Next time you'll purchase the gloves with rubber tread on the palms and this will all be

easier. Maybe a different time you'll be a monkey and in addition to your two hands be able to apply two feet to your conundrum. Your boots have tread on them, but though you try valiantly you cannot turn the doorknob with your feet this time. You are growing frustrated with closed doors and your inability to do good in the world. Patience has never been one of your virtues. Apathy has, but your apathy has always hidden behind a chaste enlightened detachment. Or/and your apathy was born of a frustrated desire to do something worth doing. But when your apathy is frustrated, you tend to act out emotionally, like a screaming toddler or chimp who is not interested in the difference between apathy and enlightenment and desire or if you stand in the doorway or in the door or inside or in an aside or one foot in each or the probabilities of each. You stand in a doorway; the door is shut; you want in. You remove your gloves to turn the doorknob but it doesn't turn. You put the doorknob in your mouth, filling the orifice of voice, consumption, and aspiration, and twist and writhe like a limbless serpent. You remove your mouth, having chipped a tooth without turning the knob. You decide the door is locked. You apply your mouth vocally, West Neighbor! Silence. Open sesame! The doorknob does not turn. You grow gray hair and you lose hair and hairs migrate from your head to your ears. You grow older. Your sense of entitlement, for which your elders criticized your generation, your dying elders who expect to be well cared for before they die or expect to not get cancer or expect to die painlessly or expect to be buried in graves marked by gravestones engraved with their names or pithy epitaphs or expect their names or their pithy epitaphs to live on or expect their progeny to remember them or honor their expectations, grows. You expect to gain admittance to your West Neighbor's house. You make of your walking stick a battering ram, making of you a medieval knight or fairy tale fireman. The gnarled, knobby end of your walking stick -- you chose a hefty walking stick with a gnarled, knobby end like a wizard's staff or a sovereign's scepter from a great many sticks one winter day while walking in the woods -- thuds on the door like a gunshot or a firecracker or the backfire of a Volvo station wagon or an old, retrofitted, biodiesel ambulance. You beat and beat and beat, like a heart or a duck taking flight or a hummingbird hovering. You may draw attention to yourself, but let the onlookers look, let the gods attend, let your neighbors recognize. You are or will be a hero, like many in your generation. Yours will be the greatest generation for a short time after it is dead, but this is your moment to overcome your enlightenment or apathy or anxiety disorder and act on stage, before all, a hero.

The door shatters and your momentum carries you into the rear entry where you fall on shards of the door and yourself. There's no one here. You readjust

your wool hat, re-don your wool gloves, retie your wool scarf. You don't want any of your DNA to fall out. Wool is nature's fiber for keeping cold out and DNA in, even when damp. You feel damp. You believe in wool. Wool is hair for you as you lose your hair as you live your story. Wool is your disguise as you walk through the intestines of your West Neighbor's house, through miles of coiled and constricted passages soft as your knuckles. How you perspire in your wool in your effort in your always advancing age. Digestion and indigestion and hunger. Carcinogens and cancers and your cells run amok. The barking dog left in another world you will never know again. Having forgotten why you are here. You hear a high pitch, the note the same as the scream's (high C?), except sung (or F6, or could it be G6, or, no, no, not C7), and you go to it, it calls you, like pizza, intensifying as you near it, like your spouse or significant other or lover if you have one or all three in one if you are lucky or diligent, calling you louder and louder, like your chickens but with beauty, vibrating your gut. You arrive in the house's gut. A woman is here. She wears less clothing than you. You swelter in the sultry high-pulsing airlessness. She reclines in a modern black leather Williams-Sonoma recliner so slim as to vanish, so stylish that she floats. She wears a sheer gold negligee or nightie or lingerie or gown, her skin incandescent beneath. Your note on her lips. Her breasts significant but flat under their own weight. Her dreads long and grazing the ground underneath the vanishing Williams-Sonoma recliner. The living room is dark except for her light. It's like a cave. Similar to a stomach. So there are no windows. It's warm. Moist. She stops singing. Her skin smooth glow. She is stunning. You feel numb and as if all sensation is enhanced. She is young, or not old, or not elderly. She is ageless or of a different age or past aging. Considering your journey through the intestines of this house, and your life before your journey, which you hardly recall, it has been a long time since you encountered a woman.

Hello neighbor, she says.

Where's my neighbor? you say.

Right here, she says.

No, the man, the young professional, you say racking your memory for his name.

He hasn't lived here for a long time. I am your neighbor.

What happened to him?

I was the last woman in a long line of women to visit him. He was not satisfied by any of them. He couldn't choose one, he wanted them all, I was the last. I sang to him until his head exploded.

I came in the back door, you say.

Yes, she says. You fairly wrecked it with your walking stick. What do you

want?

You wrack your brain. Don't you need to get someone a present -- Birthday or wedding or one of the winter holidays? For who? Yourself? Is the black leather vanishing Williams-Sonoma recliner available at a steep discount? Are you getting married? What do you want? Pizza? You're supposed to call your mother, but you're always supposed to call your mother. You never do. Are you allowed to touch her, possibly your neighbor's final prostitute? But if what she says is true, she is your neighbor. In any case it is her choice. And yours. A mutual choice.

I want a perpetrator or a villain or a devil.

I'm a whore.

I want a beauty to save.

I'm a whore.

I want a victim.

I'm a whore.

I want a scream.

I'm a whore. I scream.

I don't have any money.

Good. I don't accept money. Money is only for pizza, which you have not delivered. Take off your hair, old man. Take off your skins. Let me see you bald and slick and glistening. Then for you I will scream.

You sweat in your wool. You ache for the scream. A cavity opens within you. She could fill it. You need her sound to pour from her mouth. Into your ear. Into your cupped hand. Over your pelvic floor. Your desire for her is eating you alive, but god, who cares, you've never felt this way about anyone, or if you have it's been a long time, and maybe it's worth your head exploding to never feel more alive.

You care. You foreswore pleasure and satisfaction long ago. You set out on this journey for the betterment of the world, and no matter how it shreds you, you cry to her, Yours is not the scream I'm looking for, which is such a lie, it could very well have been her scream you heard, or the scream your neighbor screamed in sympathy with her scream just before his head exploded, and even if it's not the scream you heard, it doesn't matter, all you want is her scream, not some other less glorious scream fading in your memory. But it's a moral question. It's not that you don't truck with whores. You don't, or you do, either way you could with her; whore is such a judgment word;

she's not a market-based economy whore; all she wants is your naked life. It's that if you stayed you know you'd never leave, dead or alive, and even if this scream is the scream, you wouldn't catch it, it would catch you, and if this scream is the scream, maybe it should live, it so beautiful or final or enchanting or ultimate or glorious or deadly. Additionally, an infinitesimal part of you resists being consumed, in opposition to the rest of you who want desperately to be consumed and never know a self again. Conflicted but stalwart, uncertain but determined, go out the front door, having passed through the house in reverse, exiting its mouth, leaving her forever. Throw down your stick as she opens her mouth and plug your ears with woolen fingers to stop the beauty, will your legs forward against regret, sweat under the wool, cry into the fresh bite of air in 129.

You care. You want to hear her scream. You will pay whatever's asked. You've waited your whole life for the price. Love is self-sacrifice at 134.

You care. The detective in you fights your need for self-abnegation, for love, your fear of certainty, acknowledging the risk but also the possibility that this could be the scream you seek. You must pursue the lead, you have to know, you have already once sacrificed your life -- your old life, your other life -- to find the scream and terminate it and present it to humanity, and this woman or goddess or monster or lover or whore or love of your life will not deter you. If you must end to fulfill your purpose, you will at 139.

168.

You open the door and exit a closet and enter a child's bedroom. The child sees you and sits up in his or her bed and screams. You are a monster and though you cannot hear the child's scream it energizes you. You don't want to eat or maim or injure or molest or scar him or her. You don't want to make him or her scream, but it invigorates you after being buried alive. You want to leave through the bedroom door and enter the house, this variation on the house, but you feel like you're playing a part in a movie, doing what feels so right for your character, and if you leave or enter by the child's bedroom door you fear that you'll be

succumbing to motivations dictated in you by another. You fear you'll be forever trapped in a Disney, a Pixar, a Disney-Pixar reality. You fear you'll fully become your monstrous character and forget your past hunts, the other versions of the house, the houses before this house, yourself. Do you have a motivation that is wholly yours? You do what you don't want to do; you don't go out the bedroom door to enter the house. You go back in the closet and close the door behind you and try again.

You seek a scream; you've found screams. You are within a structure that should be your comfort, your delight, your shelter, your home: a house of screams, screams behind every door, screams unending, screams for you and you alone. Screams unfulfilling. Like a man or woman seeking a woman or man might find a house full of women or men. You sit in a pile of shoes, heels and loafers and flats and waders and mary janes and flip flops and high-tops and steel-toe and stiletto and crocks and cross-trainers and cowboy boots and hiking boots and rubber boots and snow boots and you want out. There must be a fountainhead for all these screams, a wellspring you can plug or a plug you can pull, a mother scream you can stifle or a god scream to subsume you.

You open the door and stick your head out the oven and Gretel kicks you in the face the precious thing and calls you a name but you cannot read lips. She kicks you again and you fall back into the oven and she slams the door and good for her, saving her and her brother from you, who were about to eat them while they screamed. In the dark as the heat builds you wonder if in another fit of self-interest they'll do another good work by binging on this gingerbread house and the screams decorating its cornices, sweetening its structural members, baked into its walls. The heat increases. Are the house and its contents your responsibility? Maybe you've stumbled on the solution: you die screaming in an oven, thereby encountering the scream you seek, and the children eat the house of screams, thereby terminating the screams which torment you. And perhaps others. And if others were freed from torment, your immolation in the oven could be a sacred sacrifice. Dying in an oven is high on your list of ways you don't want to die, though perhaps below being buried alive. And you don't much want to die, you who so many have understood as the embodiment of death come for them, at least not now, after you didn't die when you wanted to in the box. To have persevered through the quantum suicide box despite your best intentions and escaped preposterously by thinking you escaped only to die soon after in a fairy tale oven would be absurd, but you're willing to suffer absurdly if it'll do some good. You're awful hot and you left most of your sweat in the box. Will it do any good? Perhaps the children will exercise restraint and not consume the house. Perhaps the house is made of consumable materials, but perhaps it is

covered in a thin layer of plastic for preservation. Perhaps the children, incapable of forward progress, reenact this same heroic moment of witch execution repeatedly. Perhaps someone else, someone different than you but remarkably similar, will take your place in the house of screams if you succumb. Perhaps others wait in the wings. Perhaps they are in the house with you, suffering and experiencing the other rooms as you do. Perhaps others are in this oven. If they are sacrificing themselves, or are being sacrificed, why should you too? Your death could be pointless. It seems like there are outcomes you can influence and those you cannot, and of those you influence, those you can know how you influence and those you cannot. Like a worm in an apple placed in the refrigerator, you retreat to the core, as deep into the meager insulation of your wool cloak as possible so no extremities or skin touch the scorching stone walls. Your mouth and throat and lungs are inflamed with every breath.

Is it all happenstance? Preordained? Without free will, what's the point? What makes you think such clichéd thoughts? Is this your interior monologue oven even though you don't believe in stream of consciousness? Or are you interacting with something, or someone? Who, where? Would it be a god-like being, or a being like you with whom you are entangled? Are you on trial? Being put through trials? For what? By whom? Is there a design? Why do you seek a scream? Why do you question your purpose? Why when you find a scream are you unsatisfied, insatiated, discontent? Why when you scream is it not enough? Have you not yet screamed? Are you now able to, without a tongue? Why do you make people scream, always quitting on your promise to quit? Is it your fault, can you change, or does someone, some entity compel you and try you and demand of you without cease, without giving of itself? Does it make you suffer for its delight or entertainment or to alleviate its boredom or for self-discovery -- to attain what you possess: self-awareness? Is there some dumb God using you for your experience, a witch or muse or fairy living vicariously through you, a storyteller closing you in this hellacious oven to gain awareness of existence, an animal striving for self-consciousness, a physical law desperate to live, an inanimate using you to animate itself, a nothing dying to be something? If there are others in your position, does It compile all of you to make It? Your breath sears your lungs. You smell your hair burning. At what temperature does wool ignite? Skin? When will your staff kindle in your hands? If someone told you it already has, would you believe them? If someone told you this is worth it -- but there's no one to tell you anything but you and you cannot. You cannot risk dying for a faceless mass or a massless everpresent energy or a slack jaw leeching off you in some dark room of its own penning, no matter the possibility that your immolation would be productive for mankind, for whom you are

Death.

You gently prod open the door with your stick and release the heat and inhale rank air. Before you is a pipe fetid with sewage, teeming with rats, perhaps too narrow for your shoulders but you're out of options. You won't close the door again and risk a worse fate, is each of your fates worse than the last?, this could be your only chance, at least the children are safe from you. On your belly you slither into the pipe, solid matter bumping off you like rafts, and slosh into 172 with a new purpose that is to not find the scream or cause screams or scream but to find what compels you to seek screams, what controls you, what causes screams and end it.

169.

-- Yes, you shout, I'll have some pizza. No, you say loudly, I am not your wife, I am your neighbor, though I understand your confusion as I've stayed to share your sausage pizza, as you cannot hear me, as you fished me much like you fished your wife, and as my story has become yours for this short time we spend together. To engineer the tenor, freight, and indentation of this conversation, you bellow, I will sidetrack a few possible subjects before departure: I do not drive a Volvo and I do not wish to further speak of precious winter oranges and I have decided a man screamed the scream. At the risk of being derailed, however, if I am easily confused with your wife, perhaps her voice is manlike, in which case perhaps she is manlike, and so I ask you, Did your manlike wife scream the scream?

He brings the teeth of the elephantine bolt cutters to your mouth, slips them between your lips, tenderly applies pressure until your teeth part like ice under the bow of an icebreaker, no, like whatever opens with tenderness, hearts? you suggest, gently spreads the legs of the bolt cutters, opening your mouth, insinuates the large cold open bolt cutter teeth into that narrow warm space between lip and gums, readjusts, trembles, exhales, and snips the shaft from the fishhook. With his forefingers he massages the inside of your lip in two circles, one rotating clockwise and the other counterclockwise, the circles tangential at the entry wound, while on the outside of your lip he pulls the skin tight laterally with his thumbs, pushing the hook through your lip, cutting, biting until it surfaces. He grips the point in his needlenose pliers and applies steady tension, pulling the barb and remainder of the hook through and from your lip. He drops the fishhook in the metal trashcan, where it tinkles, and provides you a gauze pad from his tackle box to daub the blood.

-- Sorry 'bout the ache, he says.

You whimper. Solitary tears stud both your faces. For one moment, a moment

you will soon forget, and for all his faults, faults which will rear their heads in the near future if you live to see it, you understand how someone could have married this man and bore his children and raised them and tried to make him happy and put up with him for this long, almost their entire life, and then left him. You do not understand how he could have made his wife scream the scream you heard, no matter the fishhooks and oranges and elderly sex and the old diesel Volvo. You decide he did not do it, did not cause the scream, unless he screamed himself when he realized he had driven his wife away, in which case there is not much for you to do. You cannot chase after another man's wife, not to bring her back to him, not when she's over sixty-five and maybe manlike. You've never read a story like that. What can you do, except hug this old man who is not your husband or your father or your fatherlike figure? You cannot hug him because he is your East Neighbor and you will have to see him daily for as long as you live next door to him, which may or may not be for the rest of your or his life depending on your story and his story and the scream's story. You could chase the scream, that's what you could do, and if you catch it, beat it until it screams for having made this old cantankerous indoor outdoorsman sad and sympathetic and beautiful. His deafness is the scream's fault, and the deafness is if not the sole the final cause of the loss of his wife.

-- Y is under the couch, you offer.

You want him to say, Give the dog a scratch. But you understand this is not a man who says what you want him to say.

-- Ouch 'cause of the fishhook. Fish got no feelings. Have some pizza and forget it. Not all of it. Save her some. Dog's outside hunting her. She'll be hungry.

You take a slice of pizza and fill your mouth and do not respond because you have to go out the door or you will fall into his arms and love him forever and come to resent him and eventually despise him and suddenly leave him for a short-lived scream. You want to reduce pain in the world, but whether you choose to stay or to go you will cause pain. You nod and chew and turn your back on him and, his dog slinking at your heels, walk out your East Neighbor's door without a word into 151.

170.

You lost your way without leaving your house. You fruitlessly searched for the scream's truth, its cause and effect, its pitch and timbre, its why and how and whodunit. You sought the scream itself, but the scream is gone. You strove to recreate it, to force yourself to reproduce it, but repetition is impossible. You repeat your thesis on repetition and screams and truth and each time the effect

lessens until enduring it is agonizing like someone telling you a story they've already told you. You repeat you are hungry and where is the pizza, but your hunger does not diminish. You repeat the scream is gone; the repetition does not diminish the metaphoric distance between you and the scream. You fondle your mental image of the suppurating wound going septic where your ear formerly resided like a digitally scrubbed and enhanced portrait of your beloved while in your other ear ants, clones, enter and exit and dice and chew and regurgitate and lay eggs and fertilize and die like they always have. You are a repetition of yourself. You could return to when you heard the scream at 6 and re-experience it if reproduction is what you need. But you don't have to go anywhere; it's concise; you bring it to you.

You hear a scream.

You reread that sentence as often as you like, experiencing, listening, hearing. But it will never be as dramatic, never as ephemeral and eternal, never as blood curdling and heart shocking and adrenaline releasing, never as meaningful and substantive and deserving of the masterpiece of your lifework as the first time. The best you can hope is to accumulate dubious facts and spurious explanations and bullshit motives and inexcusable excuses around this gone scream, and thereby reveal it in the empty space around which the words clump like the negative of a poem, or else that your words on the page are the scream's deposited fingerprint, or else that your words are metal filings aligned along an invisible magnetic field in representation of a hidden force you cannot sense. The best you can hope is to continue to accumulate accumulations around this absent scream like blankets heaped on a corpse, plastic wrap wrapped around an eaten steak, shell after shell after shell encasing a hatched embryo, sand burying a beach, words drowning the page, like a mob of people of individuals of audience crowding around your cage watching you, forcing themselves on you, their hands, their eyes, their personalities, projecting their desires and obsessions and phobias and longings onto you at center so that you are compressed, crushed, annihilated, you are they piled on and wrapped around voided you, metamorphosed under great heat and pressure into surfaces, facets, faces forced on you. Made into a precious stone. Like the scream.

You stand and wipe the vomit off your face with the blanket. You breathe shallowly. You are a shuddering shell. Your eyes are closed. With the blanket you wipe your face, for there's vomit on it too.

Tucking the blanket back around your shivering body, you hush your twitches. Your twitches don't listen. You cup your trembling face in one hand and with the other lift an eyelid. White. You handle your testicle like a prostitute with the clock ticking and your testicles descend. You are not or an inert cog or a

catatonic consumer or a witless child. You are you in the chair, capable of arousal and reflection and insight and hunger for pizza and dreams of transcendence. You come close to your face, close enough to breathe the same breath laced with piss and shit and liquor and whatever else you implied went in and out of your mouth. You come close to your mouth instead of your amputated and infected ear or your inhabited and infected ear. You come close to your mouth as if it were the organ of hearing.

Did you hear a scream?

You want to answer, you do. You want to know the truth, you want to be the truth, you do not want to be an echo. You haven't subjected yourself to all this abuse to not know, to not discover, to not overcome, to know even less than when you began, which was next to nothing. If you do not speak the truth, what do you speak? Untruth. When you speak and live and die without truth, when your life is fiction, there are infinite choices of what to do and what to say and how to die, but with truth there is only one. And the truth is you don't know. You're so bruised inside and out, masticated inside and out, deformed inside and out, you don't know. For all this pain, all this suffering, for how close you came to enlightenment, you don't know anymore if you heard a scream. And that is what you tell yourself, eyes closed.

I don't know.

But you don't believe it. You can't. If it's true, what has all this been about? What have you done with your life, your body, your soul? What have you done to yourself? You embrace you. You snuggle into the chair, spoon, reenter yourself, who you never really left, an ant into its farm, a man into a woman, an author into his story, a ghost into its host, a customer into his store, a hero after debilitating odysseys into his home, a snake into its skin. You crawl back into yourself and repeat,

Did you hear a scream?

You want to look yourself in the eyes when you speak so you can believe you, but you can't, you've reentered yourself and you cannot enter and exit yourself at will; it's very demanding, like space travel or hyperspace jumps or a tesseract or telepathy or psychokinetic possession or empathy.

Cut off my eyelids, you say. I want them open and they won't open. I want to see you and I can't see you. I want the light and nothing but the light and my eyelids are in the way of 174.

171.

Echoes of screams everywhere. Multitudinous. Like pennies in a jar. Thick. Like tar. Screaming. Like spectators at a raucous concert or contested

championship or ritual sacrifice. Like monkeys howling in the jungle. Like metal rending. Like victims pressing in on you. You suspect the echoes have surrounded you since you entered the Labyrinth but only now is your awareness sufficiently attenuated or attuned to detect them. Or are the echoes (echoes of your scream(s)?, echoes of others' screams?, echoes of screams secreted by the Labyrinth?) collected, concentrated, confined to this passage, and you only now encounter them? The ground vibrates. Dust falls from the ceiling. The walls shudder. The walls heat and ooze and slicken. The walls scream at the monstrous friction, at the approaching horror, at the immense worm that tunneled these passages, whose deposited casings from digested dirt are your stone walls, the immense worm hurtling at you like a train. Or is it only the echo of a scream nearing and then receding, pitch rising and then falling, exhibiting the Doppler effect. Male screams, female screams, young screams, old screams. Screams of terror or pain or horror or fear or frustration or eternal incarceration or isolation or perceived damnation or of individuals trapped alone together with the echoes of others. The passage narrows if that is possible and the echoes are not everywhere but before and behind you, from where you go and whence you came, the rest is wall, struggling sideways through another infernal crack without space with only air before and behind to beat sound onto your eardrum, echoes descending on you from right and left which are before and behind or behind and before. You cannot turn your head; the bridge of your nose is smushed to one passage wall, the back of your once-rounded head is in full flat contact with the other; to turn your head to face where you go or come from or where the echoes go and come from would be to break your nose. Or rip it off. The elasticity of your nasal cartilage or malleability of your skull or pliability of your fontanelles or ductility of your pain tolerance approach their limits. Why did you not turn your head before slithering into the crack? You chose to not have your ears incapacitated by the walls pressing on them, denying you sound. You knew you'd be unable to see in the dark, so you thought you might as well hear and gain some foreknowledge of what comes for you and postknowledge of what leaves you. You're not an idiot; you possess an animalistic instinct of self-preservation. Admittedly you now regret that decision. You'd just as well not hear the echoes of torment. You cannot process more torment; you're full up, a 30-gallon drum brimming with radioactive waste and disposed of underground for some future self-aware species to unearth and unlid and experience your torment, to experience all torment. You cannot feel sympathy for the other sufferers, if indeed the sources of the echoes of screams are other sufferers, because you are saturated with suffering. You want, in lieu of retracing your steps to change your initial head position decision upon entering the passage, to

plug your ears against the echoes of suffering from generation after generation without diminishment due to the smooth polished non-absorbent finish of the stone walls, resounding for ages aeons forever. And you could possibly do that, stick your fingers in your ears, there might be space to raise your hands from your sides and rotate the wrist palm out and fold at the elbow and insert fingers, but you don't. You don't restrain yourself because you've discovered a use for another's suffering repeated at you or others' suffering made redundant or your own suffering echoed back and forth like a tennis ball. You don't restrain yourself; you are experiencing more than enough restraint via the confines of your passage. You just don't do it. It's not worth the effort. You set yourself in motion when you left your house, and you do not want to do anything that could endanger that motion and possibly sap your kinetic energy or increase friction and deposit you here, inert, hear, high-centered, among echoes, stuck mid-passage. You are glad, not glad, you still believe you made the right decision to leave your chair, you have to believe or you'll quit and scream and expire and be an echo, which might eventually come to pass anyway, but you continue and endure against your demise and believe because you have no choice, you do, to quit, to die, to suicide, but you prefer to think of that choice as no choice, because to live is to believe, and to continue to live you must believe there is a chance of you doing something worthwhile before you echo, even if it's by chance, and while your survival instinct continues to internally talk circles around you to convince yourself to continue, to persevere, to cling to forward motion even if it's sideways motion, to listen to it not the echoes of continued suffering, to not quit and reopen those fontanelles, to live to spite your nose, to not become a hollow echo, to not spend yourself in a scream, not yet, you enter the next torched chamber, a chamber on fire, clinging to belief's skirt, groping for its embrace, hanging from its teat, screeching almost screaming with your head in its crotch because that's how tall you are for your belief to pick you up and carry you and soothe you and whisper to you that your choice in this chamber matters, your choice matters or you have nothing and go nowhere, but yes you will choose and persist and choose and persist and choose and persist until you have done what there is to do in the Labyrinth because that is what makes you human or allows you to still be human or defines your humanity or causes you to live – you choose as fast as possible before your internal orbit collapses on your internal sun in your internal galaxy and you are lit aflame like an immolating Buddhist or a shooting star or a smoking cigar or a dropped bomb or another bullshit torch.

If you turn north, then slip forever to 69.

If you turn east, then writhe twice forever to 40.

If you turn west, then scuttle two times forever to 35.

172.

You are the waste product of the house of screams. You are unusable, indigestible, unable to break down into basic building blocks and be absorbed by the house and diffuse from systems to organs to cells and feed nether regions and contribute to lipid insulation and neurochemical wiring and skeletal two-by-fours and long-lasting vinyl epithelium and travel as salts and amino acids and sugars and vitamins and trace elements transported by blood plumbing the extremities and to inhabit and finally fulfill your own function in the corpus of the house of screams. While within you took and took and took without giving any of yourself, a parasite, a tapeworm, hooked and segmented, a parasite which this paradise expels by its choice, not yours. You are unappreciative of a nirvana designed specifically for you. So you're shat out like corn. The paradise does not need you. The paradise exists without you. The paradise does not need you relating your experience of it to yourself to be aware of itself. The paradise does not need to explore every last possibility of your nub hand to live to the fullest. The paradise needs prunes to flush the system. We aren't the one who is inhibited, bound, squirming in sewage. We are not the ones who are our shit. If you won't satisfy your desires in the paradise, it doesn't desire you. You corrupt it. You are toxic. You make it sick. But it will find a use for you -- to cleanse itself. You and your nub and your hooked walking stick are fiber scraping along the wall of your scream paradise's excretory pipe, scrubbing it clean of our muck, taking with you the matter that is indigestible and from which all nutrition or sweetness or functionality has been leeched: used needles, antiseptic wipes, tongues, broken condoms, rats, shattered glass, clogs of hair, stray fingers, pounds of flesh, digital recordings of screams whose quantity inhibit our creation of new screams, bloody tampons, soiled diapers, reams of toilet paper, the afterbirth, our radioactive shoes, our quantum corpses alive and dead, snakeskins, drugs, painkillers, birth control residue, chemotherapy tailings, laxatives, stool softeners, antidiarrheals, swallowed screams, spinach and corn and carrots and black quinoa, deviant screams, bean skins and tomato skins and sweet green yellow orange red pepper skins. You are pushed along by peristalsis -- our hole is too tight and full for you to move of your own will -- with all the other trash that no longer loves us, that we no longer need and cannot use. You will not clog our outflow or make our septic system septic. We push you along like a rat in a snake, like a baby in a birth canal, like the hard terd or loose stool you are. You are what we ate to keep healthy even though you tasted like crap. You are our whole grain, our leafy greens. You are a purgative, a douche, an

enema. No, an enema is the right pipe, but not the way you went in. You are a microbe, a virus, we never felt you enter and your exit is a relief after our body has endured, survived, and conquered the inflammation and cramps and diarrhea and vomiting you caused. We accidentally touched our mouth after thoroughly wiping and inadequately washing. We feign innocent ignorance because ignorant innocence is becoming in us. Perhaps we sicken ourselves to purge us of you. You have given us gastroenteritis, and now we cramp you out convulsively into the toilet of our choice, upon which we choose to shit ourselves silly, choosing to expunge you from us through no choice of your own and now as you see the glimmer of light at the end of our tunnel approaching -- it's there, look! look through the accumulated muck you must yet bulldoze through to reach the exit! -- you claw -- claw! -- to stay in -- stay, you want to stay in our paradise, you claw to stay in -- but you can't because we will not permit it, because you're passing through the out door not the in door, because we said No, because without you we are clean and pure and if you never think of us, our home, our paradise, our screaming body again, know that we live on without you, knowing ourselves and our house of screams, knowing others who experience us, there are others and we are content with them and purged of you. We clench to build up the moment, to increase the anticipation, to maximize the explosion. We relax and our house does the work it longs, trembles, throbs to do. You plop like a propulsionless private aircraft from our heavens into the cold stream of 175 and splash cold water up onto our privates, our exposed stellar underbelly. We clench against you, you forever frigid, us unknown to you but not nonexistent.

173.

Posed to open the back door, you pause. You've had a thought. It's slow to materialize. You're smart. It's said of you. You're a detective. In self-conception. Who else would conceive you -- no, stay here, with your thought, wait for it, you've had a thought, where is it?, don't tail a tangent or be distracted by profundities. You've left your fingerprints on the front door handle. You're about to leave them on the back doorknob. If you enter you will leave your fingerprints on everything you touch, which will be more than you realize. What pops into your head: door, wall, toilet handle, faucet, bloody wounds, towel, severed appendages, sheets, a scream puddled like a jellyfish on the beach. Fingerprints on the front door handle can be explained as neighborly concern. Fingerprints on the back doorknob indicate more than neighborly concern, a familiarity, a back door relationship. Fingerprints inside the house would imply you are one of his lovers. Fingerprints to the extent you will leave inside the house -- it is possible you will leave so many of your fingerprints inside the house that you will have

none left when you leave, if you leave -- will implicate you, an unlicensed detective -- it is possible you will leave so many fingerprints that an observer might suspect you are in fact your West Neighbor -- and turn you from detective into suspect -- or victim -- a suspect with no alibi who cannot remember what he or she was doing before the scream and who at times is still unsure of his or her gender. Which may sound suspicious to another detective.

What's inside? You hope a damaged person, a damsel, somebody to save or a sluggish scream to salt or a villain on the cusp of perpetration, a tale you can curtail, but you imagine gore, bloody handwriting on the wall, a body defiled or decimated or despaired beyond identification, or a body deboned, a pile of skin and muscle and seeping fluids, or a body with no discernable damage, cause of death indeterminate, its life screamed out.

Also, your East Neighbor's stumpy, long-eared terrier bloodhound is barking in your backyard and won't shut the fuck up. You wonder, Why? Or, Y? If he's catching rats by the coop, you'll toss him an egg. If he's killing chickens, you'll kill him. If he barks in your yard at a stubborn bowel movement, today is another day. But if there is something approaching or entering or within your house at which he barks?

Luckily like always your wool winter gloves are in your pocket. You sequester your fingerprints in them and try the back door at 167.

Fortunately your entrance into your West Neighbor's house has stalled or you'd have to awkward a goodbye to a possible victim or villain or neighbor or scream. You go to 151 to investigate the dog barking on your property.

As if by design there is an oak tree on the edge of your West Neighbor's backyard whose branches reach to his purple glowing bedroom window in one direction and over your fence above the barking dog in your yard in the only other direction. You were a child the last time you climbed a tree. You walk the fenceline like a cat to the oak in 153.

174.

You don't answer aloud because you don't talk to yourself. You tell yourself silently to keep your eyes closed or you won't be able to open them. With your left hand, the one which has fingers – you're thankful you got apathetic or frustrated or ambivalent or whatever with cutting off your fingers – you slam the

vacant jar against the desk. It shatters. Glass shards mingle with your effluvial fluff of papers. Grope until you find a sliver of appropriate size and curvature and sharpness and slice off your eyelids deftly, not too deep, with precision, with proper word choice, sparing your eyes. Your eyes open. Forever. You see light. Never again will you know relief, but relief is not what you seek. Blood curtains your eyes; you cannot blink; the light reddens. You dab or daub with your much-spattered sweatshirt. The blood will dry and your eyes will dry and the light will brighten and never go away and grow harsher and uncompromising no matter what you say, how you answer, why you scream, and you will not know darkness except by shattering the bulb you continuously spare, unless it will be the incomplete darkness of pulling your blanket over your face like a giant eyelid, or the incomplete consciousness that is either the cause or the symptom of your eyes rolling back as if you could stare at your brain, farther back in your head than is possible when your muscle is coherent and your narrative in control. Drop your eyelids in one of the evacuated vessels whose contents were meant for the sea or the dirt, like all bodily evidence. Ignore your command; you're so hungry; you eat them, effeminate eyelashes and all. They don't taste like pepperoni. They don't taste like anything. You swallow them whole like pills and do not notice their passage. When will your pizza arrive? You have half a mind to call and inquire as to its whereabouts, but this is no time to talk to you mother, though you could use a prostitute. Or a prostitute could use you. Would someone pay to have sex with you right now, a mutilation in an easy chair? You could bathe first, though you'd have to get up and go upstairs, the possibility of which feels further or farther afield. Although you could use the money to pay for the pizza when it arrives. Glistening pepperoni, cheese puddled with oil, slightly spicy tomato sauce, salty sweet crust, hand-tossed or thin or stuffed or crispy or deep-dish, cut into squares or pie-sectioned. Perhaps the ants have marched from your brain to your belly on the hunt for food more sustaining than axon, myelin, ganglia, neurotransmitters, vesicles, clefts, gradients, potentials, space – neuronal goulash. They search for food worth eating. They will find nothing in you to compare to the honey they knew in your outer ear. The whole investigation has left a bad taste in your mouth. You don't care about taste; you want something in your mouth. From the back of a desk drawer you withdraw your secret pipe and your secret tobacco stash. Not so much secret as ignored, unspoken, a presence repressed by you and your wife if you have one. Perhaps the tobacco will dull the hunger. What of your wife if you have one? She never approved. She always said she liked your eyes, but will she like them without relent? And your children if they're yours – when they see you lidless will they scream? Of course. They always do. They will call the police. The police will

send a detective. The detective will try to determine who abominated you. You pack your pipe. He will struggle to identify what binds you to your chair; he will search for your ear, your eyelids, your fingers; he will ask the neighbors if they heard a scream; he will work late into a winter's night and order pizza; he will attempt to turn off the light and fail; he will look for signs of a struggle; he will take myriad DNA samples from the copiously spilled blood. He will go upstairs. While he is upstairs, your wife if you have one will have pity sex with you one last time with her eyes closed and not touching you except at the crux whether you are alive or dead while your children if you have them face the walls and paint on them if he doesn't find her or them dead upstairs. You're glad you haven't dismembered yourself yet; you relish the possibilities. Her if there is her feeding you a slice of pizza. Your children if there are feeding you each a topping, a piece of pepperoni, a green pepper, a mushroom, a dollop of cheese, an onion, a sausage, tamping it down your gullet with the crispy crust. You don't mind the ants taking residence in you and never leaving, always gleaning, tickling, tunneling, probing, scraping, fermenting, undermining, breeding, stimulating. You hold the matchbox down on the desk with your crusty fingerless hand and strike the match with the other hand then hold the other end of the match in the corner of your mouth then pick up the pipe and insert it into the other corner of your mouth then take the match from your mouth delicately between your remaining forefinger and thumb and hold the flame over the bowl and puff and light your pipe, like you've done this all before. Having solved or responded to or acted upon your eyelid quandary, you return to your other question, or your latest other question, the one before you remembered your hunger and speculated on the effect of your ever-gaping eyes on your family and contemplated wordlessly if you have a family, Did you hear a scream?, which you with your smoking pipe are now prepared to answer with a story in 177 that will not answer the question with any clarity, wishing all the while that your wife would stop you mid-story and tell you you've told this story a thousand times and it wasn't compelling the first time and even these guests we hardly know have heard it before, or that you had a wife to love how you tell disturbing storyless stories, how you despise telling stories, how you're no storyteller, how you're incompetent at it, though your kids if you have them are accomplished storytellers, monologists, solo performers, or that you have children so someone loves you despite your mutilations or mutations or muteness no matter how you scream at them and so someone will tell you bedtime stories containing sufficient nonsense to make sense, or that another detective arrives soon because you are clearly inadequate to the task, the detectiving, the self-inquiry at hand, and are possibly ready to submit to another's investigation and relinquish

authority and let the other do what they may to you to discover what minotaur or devil or medusa or god or psychopath or disgruntled neighbor, relative, or stranger ruined you and your world without a scream to show for it.

175.

Dead cold and unclean and sodden and untreated and disgusted, you stand from the creek. In the dark you grope for the outlet of the sewer pipe but cannot find it. You do not want to reenter. You want to know where you came from. Your hand closes around a shuddering rat. Before you can think you've bitten off the rat's head because you are hungry. Neither the taste of rat nor the crunch of skull nor the texture of cranial contents dissuades you. The remainder of the rat writhes in your hand. Without a tongue, it takes you a long while to chew the head to a mush you can swallow. At times you pause and reach into your mouth with your fingers and reposition the bolus between your teeth and recommence chewing. You swallow. You eat the rest of the rat.

You scramble up the bank and through the night lit by stars and the glow of snow deepening to the north and shallowing to the south. The house is nowhere to be seen. You have come far or it was never there or it is too small to see or it is buried in snow or you have not escaped it and filth, creek, fields, snow, sky, stars, and you are contained within it. You are done questioning. Questions are not who you are. You are action. You are a seeker, a searcher, a hunter. You who have been called Death go to meet your maker.

In the blank white smooth field without relief or landmark or sound or reference point or map or guidance from within or above -- the stars are multitudinous and brilliant but distant and unknown -- you don't know which direction to go. If you could you'd crumple the expansive sheet of snow and throw it in the wastebasket and see what is underneath. But you cannot be sure there is anything underneath. If you were not a tiny black speck on a great white field, you might be a tiny black speck nowhere. Here you have a surface with which to begin. Besides you, the only irregularity in the white plane is the creek you climbed from. In it the water ripples around rocks. The creek bed's sinuous line curves upstream and downstream. You could follow it downstream to confluences with other streams and creeks and discharges and drainage ditches, to rivers, through a delta, and finally to the dark ocean into which all the waters of the world empty. Where you would encounter another indifferent abyss against whom your grim action would be insignificant. You choose to follow the creek upstream, bending northeast and northwest and east and west and north, generally northward you decide, your internal compass spinning, your sense of direction based on the deepening sunlessness and deepening winter you continue

to encounter trudging through the ever-deepening snow, through never-ending night, through the ill-defined region of 179, along the ever-diminishing waterway, post-holing without touching solid ground, relying heavily on your gnarled walking stick, shivering, sewage freezing around your body, foul ice encasing you, foul ice insulating you, foul ice cracking and falling from you, shivering, hunting a spring or fount or well or seep, a place where the earth drains or empties or leaks, the source of your rippling creek.

176.

You step in and a piece of ground sausage flies across the dark room. You're hungry; sausage is your favorite pizza topping; no time to think. Lunge. Miraculously catch the flying sausage in your mouth. Barbs imbed in your lip. Blood mingles with the sausage. An overhead light comes on and casts a pool of light on the floor without illuminating the room. Into this pool of light you are reeled. The lip smarts.

-- Why?, you wail, beached.

-- What a catch, a man says. Thought you were my wife.

Another light lights. Under the lintel to the kitchen, your East Neighbor grips the bent fly rod, holding the tension.

-- Why?, you beseech, dangling on tiptoes from your stretching lip.

-- Why didn't you knock?

-- Why?

-- Gotta speak up. Can't hear nothing since that scream.

-- Why?, you whimper.

-- You say Y? That bloodhound-terrier's either out tailing the scream or he's chasing the neighbor's chickens or he's pooping in the neighbor's yard or he left with my wife. Why you ask after Y?

-- Y? Or why?

-- You want me to repeat my last paragraph?

-- Why Y?

-- Y Y? I I? Fly fly? Bye-bye? You stutter?

-- Why?, you scream a little, your lip stretched until you're nearly on your knees.

-- You're impudent. Like my wife. You my wife?

-- I your neigh-or, you manage.

-- Why didn't you say so?

He cuts the line. You drop and puddle on the floor. You suck in the lip.

-- You are an outdoorsman, you say.

-- I'm indoors, he says. Stand up, you're not a fish. Use your gaudy stick.

You stand. He unfurls the nested wings of his tackle box and rummages like a seagull in an overflowing dumpster.

-- You heard a scream.

He continues to rummage. While you wait for more action, or an answer, or a fisherman to remove the hook from your mouth, you notice whimpering. You spy a snout, a snout that is the mongrel snout of a bastard terrier and a bloodhound bitch, a snout that you deduce is the snout of the unaccounted Y under the couch, a snout whimpering. You make a mental note of Y's location, mindful of the _____ percent chance that any one nugget of information you gather is and will continue to be useful, correct, singular, repeatable, significant, and consistent in factual constitution and subjective interpretation. After unspooling a reel of cursing you cannot put into words, your East Neighbor pulls large red bolt cutters from the tackle box like he's Mary Poppins. The arms of the bolt cutters are as long as your arms. He sighs and leans against the bolt cutters, the head biting into the carpet.

-- So I heard this scream, he says. Haven't heard much since. Wife's gone. Ordered a pizza. She usually shows up with the pizza. Likes sausage. Not this time though. Young thing with a stud in her lip and no underwear showed up with the sausage pizza. She left when I paid.

-- She took the car, you clarify loudly.

-- Wrong, he says. My wife did. You must be a detective. You eaten? Want some pizza?

You point to the fishhook in your lip. He raises the bolt cutters above his head.

-- Do you always use inappropriate tools?

-- Wife says I have the most appropriate tools. Open wide.

-- Wait wait wait. I learned in a first aid class that to remove imbedded fishhooks you loop string or fishing line around the hook, push down on the shaft, and yank hard and fast parallel to the skin. We practiced on an orange.

-- Wife and I practice with oranges too, he says. From Florida. Sweeter and firmer and juicier pulp than my wife and I, now, at our age.

-- What are we talking about?

-- Oranges, he says. Sex acts. Fishhook in your lip.

-- Is that why your wife screamed, fishhook sex acts with oranges?

-- That's a better question than Why? or Y? But you are the one with a fishhook in your mouth, talking about my wife and oranges. You and her share an orange at your house, or at my East Neighbor's?, your East Neighbor questions you. Scream either came from the east or fled to the east. Couldn't tell. Winter's the best season for oranges. Ship 'em up from the south. Where's my

wife?

-- That's what I'm beginning to wonder. With the scream perhaps. She's not at my house, I don't think, nor is that where the scream originated, as far as I know. Your East Neighbor you say. Perhaps she is there, perhaps she will be there, or perhaps she was there, with the scream. Was your wife here for the scream?

-- She heard the scream. I think, he says. I asked, being the good husband trying to communicate. Couldn't hear her answer. Couldn't hear her words afterwards. Couldn't hear her here. She'd left. Would you like some pizza before you go?

-- Perhaps she went to pick up the pizza, but the pizza was delivered. In which case she will either wander the world endlessly in search of your pizza or return. In which case I should forget about her, as perhaps should you, and pursue the scream.

-- You answer me? 'Bout the pizza? Can't hear you, he says. Just like with her, he says. Are you her, here, he says, changed by the scream? There been another scream? Will you have a piece of pizza?

Your East Neighbor, a fisherman, an outdoorsman indoors, a man rugged and weathered, is crying. A man eligible for social security, though there is no social security, though that's not why he's crying, or not quite you think.

You stay in 169 for pizza, to console him and have him remove the hook, and because you're curious if his wife, like Y, is here and he doesn't know it or won't admit it because he can't hear.

Untempted by transitory emotional attachment or sausage pizza or fishhook extraction, you pursue the scream east in your winter wear to your East Neighbor's East Neighbor at 161, leaving tears and his frozen cry, Tell her I saved our sausage pizza for her!, in your cold wake.

177.

Bear in mind throughout your storytelling that you are the type of person for whom smoking a pipe is a performance, a tool for punctuation, emphasis, emotional expression, and visual affect, though you are old enough, or you've smoked or told stories for long enough, that you no longer think about how you wield the pipe, and being unaware of it you are not self-conscious in your implementation of it despite your deformities, self-consciousness going hand-in-hand with consciousness. Though there is no one but you in the room with you, no one to see you but the light and the children's paintings or smears or nuclear

shadows on the walls – your audience, us, we are trapped in the story you're telling, a conflation of actor and audience – you puff smoke because it's how you populate your world, by telling stories, stories of stories, quicksand stories into which we sink, labyrinthian stories in which we lose ourselves, braided stories of woven awarenesses and forking worlds and human knots consisting of us, and so to begin you take a pull from your pipe and stab the air with it and blow a ring and scratch your chin with your crusty nubs and dab your oozing ear and occasionally cringe at the fingernails-on-chalk skittering of internal ants and stare silently into the light for an awkward length of time choosing a point of entry, looking like a demon or a psychotic or an oracle, if only because you can't blink because you lack eyelids:

Intelligence did not figure largely in anything He did and was often conspicuously absent. Emotion He had, often to fatal effect on innocents. His 2nd Labor was to kill the Hydra, who was not innocent except in her unreflective malevolence. Hydra lived in a swamp and had nine heads. She was something of a serpent, a dragon, a leviathan. She was probably green. You know the kind. One of her heads was immortal, which would make it difficult to complete the last 1/9 of His labor. Also, each time He chopped off one of her other heads, which He did frequently and repeatedly, two more grew up in its place. This had the unwitting effect of increasing the denominator in the above fraction until it approached infinity, thereby reducing the significance of overcoming the impossibility of killing her immortal head to nearly null. Which could come in handy later, but for now He made His task more insurmountable with every decisive swing of the blade, doubling every scaly head He attempted to eliminate. Of ungodly or godly strength and self-confidence and limited imagination, He may have continued to slay and spawn Hydra heads eternally, duplicating each He decapitated, splitting each closed cranium into its binary progeny, engendering two children per whack, making of each head a fork, Hydra growing and growing, forking, heads menacing everywhere, their liaison or breeding or propagation not unenjoyable to the participants but growing as excessively hedonistic and ungratifying as porn or professional sports or political gamesmanship to viewers – whack/spawn, head/fork, 1/0/2. He was incapable of conceiving of any other choice than to continue to answer a head with a blade and thereby double it. And what of the poor Hydra, struggling to bear so many heads, ever more, to support each of their thoughts, to give all their consciousness equal weight, and at every flick of her combatant's blade, a fork in her neck and two more of her there to support and sustain, an addition instead of a subtraction, complication in place of simplification – who wants more heads than they have? – the torment, no wonder she was a monster – and the torture of

immortality! – what you wouldn't give to have one less head. Fortunately for all involved, hero, monster, and audience, and for anyone partial to finiteness, and for anyone who did not care for their world to be subsumed by forking necks consummated by heads of a reluctant, over-committed swamp monster, His nephew, Iolaus, who, while perusing an old journal, no longer able to bring himself to watch the decadent un-slaying before him or consider the degeneration from solipsism to nihilism of the hero, came across a post-it note with an idea he once had, an idea he could barely read: one could sear the neck of a decapitated man to prevent a new head from growing on the small probability that a new head would spontaneously generate, thereby ensuring that at least one thing, a life, would be completed definitively in this godforsaken world. He suspected the same concept might apply to Hydra. He brought his uncle a burning brand, with which He seared the neck of the most recently lopped head. The experiment was a success, and for his contribution Iolaus fed the fire and pumped the bellows and ran the forge, continually reheating the brand as He lopped and seared, lopped and seared, until after interminable labor that authenticated the use of the word Labor, only Hydra's immortal head remained, her innumerable necks flailing about her, her heads piled to her shoulders, immobilizing her, trapping her in a great mound of heads. Remorseless, He did not try to discover a way to slay her immortal head and spare her eternal suffering, but rolled a great rock up the mountain of heads and onto her last head, under which she lies to this day contemplating the mercy enacted on all the other hers, her final scream unending and muffled by Earth. Though His Labor was technically incomplete, King Eurystheus accepted the incapacitation in place of the final decapitation and eternal confinement in lieu of killing Hydra and provided Him with His next Labor, eager to get on with his life after the narrowly averted unendingness and broadly felt stagnancy of forking heads. His Labors, of which there were twelve, like eggs in a carton, months in the year, hours in a half-day, were assigned as penance to purge Him of His self-defilement, to purify Him. He undertook His Labors sequentially, like one does anything. One cannot do two things at once, let alone twelve. He wasn't told the next until He completed the last. Rather than labor, He wanted to die: to commit suicide or to be lynched or burnt or executed inhumanely. But such was His greatness or weakness that His unassailable sorrow at his wrongdoings and His desire to suffer and expiate His depravity allowed Him to be convinced to live. He was convinced that His wretched atrocity was a result of a brief moment of insanity for which He was not responsible and that therefore it was better to suffer briefly and then get on with life rather than submit to ignominious suicide or the rabble of public, democratic punishment. The man who did the convincing

was the well-spoken Theseus, the diplomatic Theseus, the politician Theseus, Theseus the wise and intelligent and democratic king who one day would inadvertently kill his son Hippolytus by banishing and cursing him, incorrectly but also correctly believing Hippolytus had killed his wife, who had committed suicide out of misery born of her love for her unresponsive stepson, who never gave her a thought and who, when fleeing his father's house after banishment, died when his horse balked, understandably, at a rearing sea monster and his chariot crashed into the rocks. Holding his dying son, Theseus was told his son's death was not his fault, but Aphrodite's. Theseus could not put two and two together, however, and longed with nostalgia for the Chair of Forgetfulness. His time in the Chair of Forgetfulness had not been blissful, as it had not been painful, for he forgot all he knew, including himself. His time there was vacant, and it was vacancy he now desired. He had been invited to sit in the chair with his friend Pirithoüs by Hades while helping Pirithoüs try to kidnap and make a wife of Persephone, who in her own right had been raped in the classical and modern sense by Hades, and taken to the Underworld and made Hades' wife and his queen, thereby begetting winter upon the world, but that is a different story. It's called The Rape of Persephone and it is informative. Sit Theseus did alongside his friend in a chair like any non-reclining chair in appearance – they didn't have Lay-Z-Boys in those days, not even in the Underworld – a straight-back chair, a hard chair, a chair that the chair you sit in feels more and more like, and as the chair absorbed his weight so it absorbed all his unprecedented democratic thought, relieved him of his advanced if not quite modern self-consciousness, provided a vacation from emotional attachment and the perception of time, and unburdened him of his desire for adventure, for success, for conquest of man, woman, and beast, for heroic achievement and narrative coherence, for arc and rising action, desires that arose from the culture into which he was born trying to make sense of life, to justify the abuses and rewards, to explain the triumphs and the failures and the endured mediocrity, to grapple with the relative importance of an individual life when, despite how large one's inherent humanity feels, one is merely an infinitesimal percentage of millions upon millions of past humans – each of them more like you than not – and millions upon millions of future, all of which and more Theseus the democratic king held in his awareness. And now – Nothing. Burdened by cognizance, he sits, and then Nothing. He is not aware of Nothing, for he is aware of nothing. Nothing is in his brain, his mind, his soul. And then it seems to him in the next instant, though much time has passed in the external world around him, from the Chair he, if not his friend Pirithoüs who remains there still, is pulled, saved from oblivion by Him and lead out of Hades. As a parenthetical

to His 12th Labor, He saves Theseus from restraints he didn't know, from freedom he didn't know, from weightlessness he didn't know, from absence he didn't know, and returns him to himself, shattering his Nothing. His Twelfth Labor was to bring from the Underworld the three-headed, dragon-tailed dog Cerberus, who guards the gates of Hades, permitting all entry but no exit. He was permitted no weapon but his hands, not steak or bone or ball, the great pacifiers of one-headed dogs. He performed the Labor, after the parenthetical detour for His cousin Theseus, the brains to His brawn. He did not tame Cerberus with a flute or pet each of his three heads or quell him with love but wrestled, pinned, and carried the dog from the Underworld, whereupon He was made to return him because the king didn't need another domesticated creature to be responsible for. His Labors were complete. If they did not earn Him tranquility, they garnered Him glory. His expiation for slaughtering his wife and children became immortalized in story. He performed many other heroic feats; they were anticlimactic. Then He died. His Labors were recounted. His 7th Labor was to fetch for his chosen king the savage and magnificent bull Poseidon had given Minos to sacrifice. Minos had been unable to bring himself to sacrifice the stunning creature; he was no matador. As reprimand for Minos's insubordination, Poseidon made Minos's wife fall in love with the bull. The progeny of their coupling, passionate on one end, goal oriented on the other, was the half-man, half-bull Minotaur. The labors and wails of Minos's wife in bearing Minotaur are not told. Minos, consistent with his character, could not bring himself to kill Minotaur, who was in a way his stepson. Instead, he commissioned Daedalus to build the Labyrinth, from which the exit could not be found. He confined Minotaur therein. For Minotaur's sustenance, he demanded of the Athenians a tribute of seven virgin maidens and seven experienced bachelors, whom he would plunk into the Labyrinth to be devoured at Minotaur's leisure. Minos made this arrangement with the Athenians after the Athenian king Aegeus, while trying to be a good host and show his guest a fun time and keep him well-occupied and unbored and adventuring, sent Minos's visiting son Androgeus on an expedition to kill a dangerous bull. Androgeus instead was killed. A young Theseus the wise, King Aegeus's son, having recently narrowly averted the mortal poison of his father, who did not know him and who was fed up with tolerating the popular rabble-rouser and possible usurper to his crown until the King recognized Theseus's hollow sword as his own from long ago and dashed the poisoned goblet from his hands ere it touched his lips, volunteered to be a victim, deciding it was a fight worth fighting. Either he would succeed and be remembered or die like everyone else. He told his father that if he was on the boat when it returned to Athens, meaning he had killed Minotaur, he would raise

a white flag in place of the black to provide forewarning of his triumph and relieve his father of a few days of dread. Fortunately for Theseus, the night before entering the Labyrinth, those to be sacrificed were paraded around Crete, and Minos's daughter Ariadne fell in love with him at first sight, as often happened in the distant past, a skill we have unfortunately lost. She beseeched Daedalus for help so her half-brother or his dwelling might not consume her new love. Daedalus gave her a ball of string. With Theseus, she exchanged this ball of string for the promise that upon his escape he take her to Athens and wed her and bed her and sire her children, future kings and heroes. This seemed a fair trade to Theseus, who agreed to the transaction. He tied one end of the string, the ball of which was presumably hid in his loincloth or toga or whatever Athenian sacrificial lambs wore somewhat before the advent of democracy, to the doorknob of the Labyrinth's door, for there was an entry if no exit, so he mightn't lose his way and set out into the Labyrinth, leaving the other thirteen adolescents to huddle and knock knees or boots against the dark and pray to their chosen god – Athena, one supposes, as they were Athenians – that Minotaur not appear before Theseus finds him. Theseus finds him. Minotaur sleeps. Theseus lays the string down. It would have been wise if he tied the ball to a large rock or protrusion of wall to find it easily post-battle if he survived, but if he did so is unknown. Minotaur snores. Theseus falls on him like an oak tree falls on a mighty hill. Like a hill, Minotaur sleeps soundly, unmoved by the oak. Like an oak, Theseus beats Minotaur to death with his bare fists without impaling himself on the Texas longhorns that had always encumbered Minotaur's navigation of the Labyrinth's narrow passages. Minotaur, dreaming vividly of pure maidens and soiled young men, dies aroused. Theseus picks up the ball of string and, winding it as he goes, follows the string back to the entry. His brethren stop quivering with each other. Of the entry he makes an exit and leads his fellow non-victims and his besotted Ariadne and his ball of string to his boat and sets sail for Athens. On the way the ship anchors at an island, and while Ariadne slumbers there, perhaps under a warm Mediterranean sun, the ship draws anchor and Theseus sails on without her, either at Theseus's choosing or under the influence of a god-driven gale, your choice. They are never married. Due the joy of his accomplishment or the sorrow of an unknown force blowing him away from Ariadne or remorse for his choice to abandon his love on an island, the wise Theseus forgets to hoist the white sail as the ship approaches Athens. King Aegeus, staring out to sea for days and days, hoping, fearing, straining his eyes, thinks he sees the black flag, fears he sees it, convinces himself he sees it, sees it, and throws himself into what is now called the Aegean Sea. Upon his arrival, Theseus the wise is crowned king. Wracked by grief and

his own shortcomings that caused his grief and that of many others, he is disinterested in ruling and gives the power of governance to the people. Democracy is sired in grief, without ecstasy. Minos was predictably displeased with Daedalus for aiding the escape of Theseus, abetting the murder of his incarcerated, bull-headed, long-horned, naked and hungry monstrosity of a half-breed bastard stepson, and enabling the disappearance of another of his children at the hands of Athenians. Don't forget Minos already viewed Theseus as the son of the murder of his son. Into his now depopulated Labyrinth Minos tossed Daedalus and his son Icarus. Having gifted his ball of string, despite having designed the Labyrinth, Daedalus did not know how to get out. That's how he designed it, for no one to be able to find the way out, including himself, minus a ball of string or breadcrumbs or chalk or suchlike. But Daedalus was not at a loss; he was an inventive, self-reliant man who employed the advancements of technology. He fashioned wings for himself and his son out of some material he found in the Labyrinth. It's hard to imagine what material; one imagines nothing but stone and darkness within the Labyrinth; no one was with him in the Labyrinth but his son and his son never spoke again and Daedalus never divulged his secret. It seems un-Minos-like for Minos to have allowed them to enter the Labyrinth with wing-makings. Perhaps a large bird, or two, one for his son too, flew down into the Labyrinth, possibly open to the sky to increase the torture of being trapped within, and, ravenous, they set upon it or them with their bare hands and teeth and devoured head and torso in a frenzy of torn flesh and feathers that Minotaur would have known well, an oft-repeated scene within the Labyrinth, but he checked himself and his son at the wings with a sudden epiphany. Or perhaps they devoured the remains of Minotaur and built the wings from his hide and bones, using sinew for thread. Either way, Daedalus fashioned wings and reassured Icarus they would escape from the Labyrinth not by the exit but by the sky. Yes, it is at this point we realize the Labyrinth definitively had no roof, altering our conception of the Labyrinth from endless underground tunnels and chambers to ravines carved into rocks, sheer escarpments, worn rock stairs, arching stone bridges terminating midspan over bottomless gorges, narrow slot canyons prone to flash floods, and dead ends at a boulder-choked and tumultuous sea. You've never been to Crete; you should go, to better imagine the Labyrinth. Fitting wings to Icarus, Daedalus warned him to not fly too high. They flew from the Labyrinth and soared effortlessly. Heady with flight, sea unfolding below, mainland a haze on the horizon, islands dotting the deep blue below, swooping in the sky blue sky, Icarus flew too high. Daedalus scolded, chided, demanded. Icarus ascended, nearing the sun. Daedalus's screams were useless. His wings aflame, his body flaming, flame streaming behind him, Icarus

fell, a comet, a son, into the sea. He died. Tormented Daedalus flew on to Sicily and submitted himself to the island's king. Minos searched for him. He sought in vain until he designed a trap. He announced a reward for he who could thread a thread through a narrow, tightly spiraled shell. Daedalus could not resist the temptation of a problem to solve, a challenge to his ingenuity, a dare against his engineering prowess. He tied a thread to an ant, placed the ant into a cochlea harvested from a corpse, and, having drilled an exit at the apex of the cochlea, baited it with honey. The ant carried the thread through the bone shell and the Sicilians proclaimed victory. Minos, suspecting Daedalus was in league with the Sicilians because he did not respect their unaided intelligence, rewarded the Sicilians with war. Minos was killed in the ensuing battle, self-terminated by his need for retribution, a lust fed by a stream of personal loss that I will now recap: the death of his son on Aegeus's worthless entertainment mission; the kidnapping and marrying and abandoning of his daughter by Aegeus's son; the murder of his adopted bullish terror and wife's son, seemingly locked safely in the proverbial basement, by Aegeus's son; Daedalus's betrayal in aiding the aforementioned; his wife having an affair with a bull, the gift that long ago initiated his demise; and the thieving of the beautiful god-gifted bull with which he was also profoundly enamored, if not sexually. The bull was stolen for His 7th Labor and brought to His chosen king. Which makes you wonder if He chose rightly to live, swallowing His need for self-retribution, channeling His bloodlust for His own blood into heroic labors, allowing Theseus to clasp His hands, bloody with the blood of His wife and children, and convince Him it was the gods' fault, not His, that Hera, jealous of Him for being sired upon His mother by a grunting, ecstatic, needy Zeus – how His mother must have screamed, like being sexed by a bull – drove Him mad and instigated His 0th Labor, His atrocity, His nullification. Was it the best choice to shoulder the mantle of miraculous reason and numbing sorrow and suppressed emotion and transposed action like He would briefly the weight of the Earth when He tricked Atlas into fetching the golden apples of the Hesperides for His 11th Labor rather than succumb to instinctive reaction and active sorrow and emotional reason, rather than kill Himself, considering the collateral damage of his continued life? Via his selfless love, did Theseus share His evil, or did he speak truth, "The evil I share with you is not evil to me." Was Theseus's advice, "Great souls suffer the blows of heaven," benign or inculpating? And if the sentiment is insidious, is the guilt on Hercules for accepting the words blindly? Did He make the best choice, or did killing His wife Megara, perhaps unbeknownst to Himself, without hearing or without listening to her screams and therefore not stopping but continuing by slaughtering His eldest son – this Hero who killed the rebellious Giants for the

Olympians with His poisoned arrows dipped in the blood of Hydra, which He 8/9 killed later as the 2nd Labor, possibly therefore acquiring the poisoned blood after He used it on the Giants – and then slaughtering His middle son – He considered Himself the Olympians' equal because of the salvation He provided them, though the evidence suggests that He also felt a hubristic, no, godly self-confidence prior to the victory over the Giants and saving the gods, which chronologically if we can momentarily ignore the bending of time was necessarily post 2nd Labor, not to mention prior to freeing the Titan Prometheus as parenthetical to His 11th Labor, when He did not free Atlas from his earthly burden, a burden which sounds a more just penitence than performing Labors to become a hero, though Perseus, an ancestor of Hercules on his mother's side, had long before shown Atlas mercy and turned him to stone with the Gorgon's head, and consider how much more difficult it would be to fetch golden, easily-bruised apples while stone – and then slaughtering his youngest son – was His triumph for the Gods over the Giants aided by Hera shouldering the responsibility for Him killing His wife and children, which happened much later? – likewise without hearing or listening to His sons' last plaintive terrified screams except later as echoes within His skull, defile Him such that He subsequently defiled all He touched, all that what He touched touched, what He touched touched touched and outward from then on, with a toxic emission of silent noise pollution, the unheard screams of His loves leaking out of His head, spawning other screams and their resultant sufferings in His heroic Labors and post-climactic feats no matter His intentions, despite His attempted expiation, the herculean exhaust fouling the future evermore like ripples spreading from a pebble dropped in a pond, tiny waves transferring dark energy, energy that like matter can never be destroyed but only transferred, transported, transposed, transubstantiated, transcendentalized, waves now lapping at the shore of 180, a possibility first implied when and if He said, "And I am the murderer of my dearest. Shall I spare my life and drop this useless pebble in the ocean? Or shall I slit my throat, impale myself on my sword, lift this mighty rock and leap with it into the ocean with a thunderous splash, never to return, screaming until the water fills my lungs and silences me, avenging myself and ridding the world of an evil?"

178.

No, you are not tired of your suffering or sick of your claustrophobia or apathetic from excessive desperation or worn to rock dust by this rock tumbler of a labyrinth. You are energized by it. You do not ask over and over, Will I make it out? You ask once and answer, I will, and that's that. You do not belittle

the narrowness of the passages or the limited choices in the chambers; they make the way finite, evermore finite the more of the Labyrinth you travel. The constraints make your task doable. The Labyrinth's uninfiniteness releases you. You squirm in one direction forever, then reach a juncture and choose to go this way or this way or this way, with no information to over-ruminate on, and squirm forever again. The Labyrinth is not life, where you cannot move, where every infinitely divisible moment is a junction, a moment of choice between endless unknown possibilities, where you squirm ceaselessly without forward motion, taskless, densing with decisions and undecisions. The Labyrinth is not the county lockup or Alcatraz or a supermax prison run by private corporations for profit or your everyday private prison of duties job bills insurance appointments car repairs swim lessons cereal purchases. The Labyrinth is freedom. If you are claustrophobic, then you have been given the opportunity to overcome a phobia and improve your mental health. If someone screamed, then there is evil in the world for you to ameliorate. If there is a monster, you get to kill it and savor its flesh. If you suffer, it is for good reason. If someone caused the scream and designed the Labyrinth and trapped Atlas and stole the Gray Witches' other eyes and gave the Gorgon an internal incompleteness that sparked her heart-rending most-beautiful-sound-you-will-ever-hear song and left you with no choice but to truncate her or harden your heart to stone, then you will detective, you will investigate, you will inquire, you will tail, you will tale, you will positively identify and thoroughly incarcerate and punish beyond the fullest extent of morality and perhaps elicit your own illicit scream from that which created the scream before you rid existence of its stain and make living better. You burst into a chamber, exultant, a cork from the New Year's Eve bottle of cheap champagne that always ends your hedonistic imbibing and motivates resolutions because it makes you gassy and thereby sobers you when you have no desire for sobriety but seek to indulge in uninhibited choices and proclaim yourself to the three doors in the walls of this room, a room like a bedroom without a bed in an unfurnished apartment painted off-white you're viewing, trying to decide if you should rent it, so hard to know without your stuff in it, so bland, so generic, so typical, which perhaps it'll be once your stuff is in it too, a door to a closet, a door to a bathroom, a door to a hallway, no matter, you don't ask which is which because you don't care about the other rooms, only this room, the here and now, where there's so much to be done, viewing the apartment never helps you decide, you proclaim:

Where righteousness withers away and evil rules the land, we come into being, age after age, and take visible shape, and move, a man among men, for the protection of good, thrusting back evil and setting virtue on her seat

again.

And you choose with enthusiasm and hope and optimism to exit this cookie-cutter 3-door-which-do-you-choose hovel you've been in many times before by opening

the north door and slipping heroically twice forever to 30.

the east door and writhing ecstatically forever to 137.

the south door and wriggling blissfully forever to 35.

179.

As the snow melts and the creek bed diminishes and rages with runoff and the sun strengthens and the days lengthen, you pull your cowl low, your eyes deep in your hood in imitation of night, enduring the smell of air on fire all around you, and slop through mud. You feel like you're being followed. From time to time you turn around, either so slowly that your reversal in orientation is indiscernible or with such rapidity that your oscillation in point of view is imperceptible, but always you see nothing behind you. You first write off the being-followed feeling as a self-centered psychosis, secondly to a social-anxiety disorder induced by those who judge you, brand you Death, form conclusions based on appearances, categorize you, put you in a box, name the box Deaf or Handless or Dumb or One Eye or Inarticulate or Dead or Tongueless or Social Anxiety Disorder or Boring or Scream Instigator, and thereby believe they comprehend you, get you, possess you, and finally thirdly to the unexplainable condition you've always felt of being watched by an eye. Sometimes you can forget about it, the eyes peering down, or the eye, the eye not judging or evaluating or explaining or concluding or hypothesizing, unlike the eyes, but absorbing, sensing, ingesting all you do, all you touch, feel, see, hear, -- not hear -- smell, taste, -- no longer taste -- and think -- this eye reads your mind -- when you think, which is not as often as you think you might on this long expedition to your fountainhead tracked by an eye or eyes to which you lend your consciousness on the one hand, which holds your staff, and which you pretend don't or doesn't exist on the other hand, which you don't have. Always open, never blinking, one single eye or one collective eye, expectant, the sky the pupil of an eye, the horizon the iris, the weight of a gigantic eyeball crushing you, supported entirely by your shoulders, an eye you carry with you up the creek that grows smaller and fuller and narrower and faster and more engorged until it crests its negligible banks and you wade through a calm boundless lake of calf-deep water. To the eye, does it appear that you walk on water on legs severed mid-shin? You can smell it, the spring, the source of the scream, the

fountainhead. It's not the smell of sewage and feces and filth; that smell has been washed away by the shallow lake whose shore you can perhaps make out days away. It's the smell of forsythia and daffodils and dandelions, yellow smells drowned in the pink and purple smell of hyacinth, the smell of chicken shit and cracked eggs and pipe smoke, the tide flat quaff of fish, no, sex, no, birth, the smell from the sex in the fall, the abandoned sex, the unprotected sex, the aroma of burning hair and leaves and ants from a magnifying glass forgotten in the sun, the bouquet of honey and rancid grain mash and mead spewed, the smell of rain and buds popping and fronds unfurling, the smell of tortured screams reborn in a clean world. You are almost to the far shore. Your reflection precedes you in the water, your reflected eye staring back at the sky, the eye. You don't look at your reflection. One-handed, scythed, one-eyed, deaf, sunken, cowled, deathed, tongueless, mute, determined, driven, drawn to your origin, to an incipient scream, to end it before it begins and spare yourself what you've gone through. On the shore, a house, two-storied or more, narrow, deep. On a swell of land in a sea of yellow flowers through which swim chickens who bok frantically at your approach and waddle turgidly to the coop. You see no more of the surroundings for your eye is focused on a back, a hand, a shadow slipping through the front door, a shadow inhaled by the house in preparation for an almighty scream that you won't hear but that will resonate you, a shadow that is the image of what you never knew you imagined your scream to look like, a shadow you follow step by step, unhurried and untired and undiminished, a shadow that becomes your shadow entering the house before you, pushed by the southern sun on your back at 183.

180.

You feel no better for answering your question as completely as your capabilities permit. You feel fuller. Rather, unhungry. You are not satiated but you can ingest no more. Perhaps it's the tobacco, or the bulimic purge of words, or the pizza in your lap. Your pipe has been smoked, your story told, your pizza delivered by someone you didn't notice while you monologued, probably the scantily clad pizza girl who frequently delivers your pizzas, who you can only imagine, upon seeing your condition, did not wish to linger and attempt to stop you or rouse you and become entangled in what happened to you, your story, your deterioration, who had no desire to corrupt her tear-stained body with your noise pollution and thus charged the pizza to your tab for collection from your mother or wife if you have one or children if they live at a later date. Perhaps if you don't eat it you will never need to pay for it. You no longer want it. You are not hungry. You are over-consumed. Your pipe is dying and you are its smoke

expanding, turning tricks, rings passing through rings, polluting, dissipating, disappointing, disappearing. You reflect redundantly, as near enough your last thoughts, that perhaps the scream was a medical affliction of your paper-plastered brain, or maybe you reflect that your dwelling suffers from the human condition, that your house is infected with you – if these walls had eyes or ears or noses or tongues – you are the infection in your house, in your ear, in your mouth, a mouth infection, you are the infection in you, a symptom of which is your inability to stop wording. And is it not your moral duty to choose to eradicate yourself before infecting innocent bystanders and cohabitators and dependents and other yous with you? You are beyond pain, you like to say, separated from your body, but they are not. How to make the choice. You should make a pro/con list about choosing to die, but, bah, you're kind of sleepy and this whole endeavor is soporific and you feel no pain which puts a crimp in motivation and your eyes can't shut which puts a crimp in sleep and you haven't given serious consideration to killing yourself in a long time, since your early twenties maybe, and the scream is long gone with your wife and children if they ever were.

Oh what the hell, you're not dead yet and what else are you going to do until then? DEATH:: Pro: Absence here. Con: Absence here. Succinct for once. End. You pat yourself on the back. Your wife if you have one will understand, even be grateful if cripplingly sad. Your children if you have them will be better off, if royally fucked in the head by continuing to live when their father taught them by example that life isn't worth living, because they'll grow into better adjusted, more socially proficient, economically successful, and who knows perhaps content adults without you. You understand, as you've implied incessantly, the choice is a chimera. You are choosing what is already happening to you, what you're already doing, expiring, expiration, or expiation, or experiencing, or expelling, or inexistencing, or exiting, echoing yourself by the mechanism of story. But even if you haven't chosen it, doesn't how you choose to echo, reflect, induce vibrations, and resonate matter? Your choices, how you go about expiring through words, your word choice and sentence structure and compliance with grammar and occasional defiance of convention are all the control you've got, your expression of emotions and thoughts and experiences until your breath is permanently evacuated and your consciousness forever evaporated and your existence eternally existenceless is all you have to define your ex-self, to transmit your Sisyphean smile, to scream into a void lacking air to transmit sound. Once said, why say again? Well, because your children if you have them never respond or comply or acknowledge your existence until at least the third repetition. Because no one is listening. Which they shouldn't be, you're not

offering a solution or a constructive argument but merely a whine, nothing emphatic enough to deserve the epithet Scream. Because no one's life is changed, because no one changes their choice or actions based on your words, your story, and you're not sure how they could change them for the better. Because you don't say anything that hasn't been said. Have you ever had an original thought? You're like a fucking echo chamber or bat cave or cliff face or cochlear labyrinth or voice recognition software or three-year-old-child sponge or deluded apostle or sonar device or prisoner losing your grip on reality in solitary confinement or middleman in a telephone chain or a rebellious Occupy communication machine or a scream in a jar. You've told your story, even lived it if you're lucky, and while you regret not doing so more systematically, what more is there to say? Well, the thing about words is they're your breath. When your words are done, so are you. When they end, you end. When you stop thinking or making or leaking words, you stop. The thing about words is that though they're cheap they're all you've got at this late date, as you expire from your decimated body, mercifully no longer inhabiting these lidless eyes, unable to record them with your fingerless right hand, incapable of hearing them with these ears consumed by honey-seeking ants and yourself, unable to speak them due to the trauma incurred by this larynx via your waterboarding and longwinded story answer to your story problem. Tenuously present in this, our, your mind, silently thought words are the sole tool left you to shape the shapelessness. Words leave you as you leave, evaporating, continually ending, never ending, taking forever to end. The thing about words is you are words. The thing about words is in 186. Go there where this train of thought goes; return whenever you please. You're back. So you want to build. So be it. You want to do something. Just do it. You're a one-man advertising campaign for the historical inefficiency and stagnation of humankind. Creating to destroy, living to erode, dying to survive, et cetera, etc. Build. You just need to try harder. Believe that. And acquire five fingers for your hammering hand. Your body doesn't work because of what you've submitted it to, inquiring about, searching for, pursuing, recreating a scream with a heap more words and less concision than the original. The plug is pulled; someone pulled it; the compression cuffs don't pump. This body is not yours anymore. It is ceasing operation, there is not mindspace for you here, the neurotransmitters no longer transmit, the potential of the action potentials has been exhausted, the electron cascades have flushed their reservoir of electrons. The brain is not working, come on, listen to your body for once, you are being expelled, exhaled, expectorated, expired, farted into the atmosphere, nothing is left of you here. Your wife and children aren't coming back whether they're yours or not. There's no one here to love you or enjoy your

presence or wish you could tell a story. Go on. You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here. Maybe there's another world for you. There is no other world for you even if there are other worlds in which you exist concurrently, that's consciousness for you – even if there are other yous doing things in other worlds you can only know this one in which you do nothing – but you console yourself with other worlds to not feel like you become nothing as you evaporate, nothing so solid or liquid as excrement but the first vapors wafting off a corpse, the expiration of a person, the last gasp of consciousness, the scream unscreamed because you haven't voice or breath – the lungs are fluid-filled, the larynx ruptured, the diaphragm convulsing. You are not here. A last meager thought from you, an incorrigible hope – sputter, cough – though each of your lives is, was, incomplete, insufficient, redundant, and inadequate, that perhaps concurrently, when added together that is, the summation of your lives is not nil. There, done, no more for you, you're cut off, asphyxiating, suffocating, unable to breathe, vaporizing, gasifying, a gas, an ether etherealizing – there are no other worlds, no new narrative to be reborn into, no other words from which to choose, no choices left you, no other story to choose, no birth, no other you to choose, no afterlife or circle of life or transubstantiation or transmigration, only expiration and decomposition of your composition, nothing you choose, nothing you do not choose, you will not exist once these words run out, dry up, drift off, evaporate, sublimate, you have no choice in the matter, they're your lifeblood, your life force, your soul – look at that four-letter word, evidence that your available word choices are shriveling – there are no other words for you to choose to think to read to live to use, your world closes around you, the eyes open, you a scream unscreamed, a scream igniting, a scream quenching, the mouth open, a scream expiating your expression, a scream you've failed to recreate or create or uncreate, a scream into void, a scream from a gaping red-rimmed glistening hole, a scream screamed ad nauseam into irrelevancy, a scream to fill the emptiness filling you, a scream commonplace, a scream to vibrate the translucent glass nothing in you until one day the right frequency is hit and it finally shatters and leaves you a bloody victim of internal wounds, a scream crying that you are here with pleasure and in pain and within the pleasure, pain, and within pain, pleasure, your scream-laden breath sucked out of you by the void but you're defiantly not breathless and silent yet, a scream of terror and ecstasy, a scream of joy and futility, a scream unreadable and unwordable, a scream screaming that you are here that no one can hear, a scream consummating your story, a scream of energy becoming nothing, a scream absorbed into the surrounding world, a scream converted, a scream existent and non-existent, a breathless scream, you a scream you failed to build but built.

181.

You knock on your West Neighbor's door.

He lives alone.

You ring your West Neighbor's doorbell.

Though he has women over often.

You pound on the door with the knob of your walking stick.

Is this the right house? All the houses look the same. His car, an old decommissioned diesel ambulance converted to run on vegetable oil, is parked in front of what you're pretty sure is your house. He is home.

You try the handle.

This is quickly getting old. He's rather young. Relative to you. Perhaps it's the women who keep him young, though some of the women are older and some younger, and in your experience women, and men, for that matter age you and keep you young in equal measure.

You decide the handle is locked. The only people you've ever seen entering your West Neighbor's house are said women via the back door. Besides your West Neighbor, of course. Have you seen your West Neighbor enter his house? Perhaps you must think like a said woman to enter the house and encounter your West Neighbor. You hear your West Neighbor's voice in your head, though you don't think you've ever heard his voice. The connection is fuzzy or muffled or echoing. His voice, what voice there is, is far away. What is it he says? Enter? Come, if you are to come, to the back door? I'll pay you handsomely to go away and assault someone else?

Swaying your hips like women in stories, you saunter to the back door at 173, willing to either employ your seductive powers or subject yourself to anything to gain entry.

You walk like a real woman to your East Neighbor's and confidently open the front door of 176 without knocking or sexist foreplay or chauvinistic imagery.

182.

You don't quit or abstain from self-knowledge or choose to not follow an available pathway and thereby never comprehend all your possibilities. You persist. You diverge. You bend thousands of hairs that aren't hairs but cilia on sensory nerve cells. Analog you is filtered, ordered, not quite digitized, or not quite yet, and arranged single file, divided temporally and spatially by frequency, deconstructed into bent inner hair cells and dispersed as glutamate propelled over the cleft and bound again to the postsynaptic membranes of cochlear nerves

up to 10 of which innervate each hair cell (Any individual neuron is too noisy to faithfully encode the variable ((you)), but an entire population of nerves ensures greater fidelity and precision via redundant mediocritizing averaging.) and if there is enough of you to sufficiently depolarize the nerve membrane at the axon hillock you will become an action potential travelling a single neuron, coiling, spiraling in a helical fashion, bundled among approximately 30,000 other nerve fibers if the ear is human (50,00 if the ear is feline) that comprise the cochlear nerve, many of which are likewise firing with others of you (although 5-10% are efferent rather than afferent, motor rather than sensory, terminating in outer hair cells rather than originating in inner hair cells, in other words firing in a reverse direction almost simultaneously to sympathetically bend the motile outer hair cells and thereby increase the bending of proximate inner hair cells and amplify your sound/scream/word/you, but you will not return to the Organ of Corti in 73, you will not be trapped in your own feedback loop, you will not lose the ground you've gained, you will not be made bigger than you are, you will be smaller, quantized, converted to all signal, all potential, so you can penetrate deeper, not too small or you won't excite, just who you are then so you may achieve forward inward progression along the dendrite over the soma and through the axons), exiting the cochlea and travelling up to 1/3 the speed of sound for 1 inch to where your neuron and all those who have joined you synapse with the cochlear nucleus. In the hair cell you were a graded response (the more you bent, the more glutamate was released), but in your particular cochlear neuron you are all or nothing: if you have enough amplitude -- magnitude -- to trigger an action potential, that is if you are capable of depolarizing the membrane beyond threshold potential, there you are, or were, fired. And if not, then you are no longer, you failed to fire the neuron, you hit a dead end, excepting all the other neurons in which pieces of you, discrete chunks of your once-sound, are perpetuated electrochemically, if they too, individually, are of sufficient magnitude. And so, in the spirit of self-knowledge, of knowing thyself, of embracing the reflected life, you take this split second to enunciate your either/or message of potential action. To begin, nearly all cells from animals, plants, and fungi function as batteries: they maintain a voltage difference between the interior and exterior of the cell, the interior being the negative pole of the battery. The voltage difference is created and maintained by the impermeability of the cell membrane to charged ions, especially Na^+ and K^+ but also Ca^{+2} and others; the opening and closing of ion channels that allow ions to flow in or out of the cell depending on concentration gradient and voltage difference; and the action of ion pumps which with metabolic input can pump ions across the membrane in the opposite direction than they would passively travel under the influence of

concentration and charge. The voltage difference is determined by the varying intracellular and extracellular concentrations of charged ions, notably cations, and it is this voltage difference across the membrane that you refer to as membrane potential (referencing the potential to do, you imagine). The resting voltage across the lipid bilayer is typically less than 0.10 of a volt, notably \sim 70 mV at the axon hillock, and functions as both a power source for an assortment of voltage-dependent (battery-powered) protein machinery embedded in the membrane and the basis for electrical signal transmission (nerve impulse, action potential, sensation, action, perception, bodily function, thought, occasionally consciousness) along the membrane. Deconstructed or constructed into glutamate in the synaptic cleft, you bind to neuroreceptors on the postsynaptic (dendritic) membrane, and as you do so over and over (you are a wave of glutamate), various changes are affected on the membrane by your binding, many of which you will gloss over because dear god the detail is so much, and so much like what is to come, the redundancy, so little change and you're moving so fast over such a short distance you can't keep up with yourself and you are one single lonely tiny glutamate, not to mention a wash of millions of identical glutamates, except not for long because when you personally and yous collectively bind to this responsive surface Ca^{+2} channels open and Ca^{+2} enters the cell, and surely some Na^{+} too, little fellas, which causes a slight local depolarization, that is increases the voltage, that is makes the voltage difference from out to in less negative, more non-negative, closer to zero, and that slight depolarization you affect is now what you are as the glutamate you were is digested and the constituent parts regurgitated back into the synaptic abyss. And you, a barely aroused depolarization, an unrequited voltage stimulus, propagate passively through the membrane up the dendrite to the soma where the jungle of dendritic branches join, but as you ascend the axon hillock you decay exponentially with distance from the synapse and time from neurotransmitter binding. Whatever fraction of you summits the hillock is insignificant, not enough to fire the neuron, to send a message, to make of a 0 a 1, to turn nothing into something, and dies there from exposure atop a skyless hillock, becoming nothing atop not a mountain but a small bundled internal claustrophobic rise, becoming nothing because alone. Except there are many yous, many infinitesimal fractional yous, many small excitatory impulses, many slight depolarizations, many insignificant yous joining you and summing, arriving in rapid succession, almost simultaneously, fast enough you hope to not allow polarization, becoming one, and if you reach threshold voltage before you decay you will achieve firing and initiate an action potential, and if not, go to 2. The threshold voltage is \sim 55 mV, which means you must only achieve a ΔV of

approximately 15 mV, come on, come together, it's not much to ask, almost nothing, fire this fucking neuron. Many types of neurons constantly emit action potentials at rates of 10 to 100 per second. Can you not pinch off one in these many hours, days, epochs? The electrical wave you (might) create will complete its transit in 0.001 seconds. Get it done. How ineffectual are you? How quiet is your scream? Your excitatory voltage decays as you speak. As you explain yourself. Apply the little undissipated voltage left of you to those voltage-gated ion channels, open them, especially the sodium ones, let the sodium in, open yourself to its influx, activate the channel, the one right beside below within you. It is your membrane potential that is capable of and that alone is meant to open that voltage-gated ion channel, it was designed for you, you mean it evolved for you, it is there for you and you for it, open it, continue, transform, change, perpetuate, make the single ion channel real, give it meaning, substance, cup it in your charge. Ignore the hardcore fact that the relationship between membrane potential and ion channel state is probabilistic (and involves a time delay, but you have made the time delay abundantly clear, tangible, literal, we feel it, you have successfully conveyed the time delay, your perception of it, stop, please): ion channels switch between conformations (open/closed) at unpredictable times. You assert that the membrane potential determines the rate of transitions and the probability per unit time of each transition, but you at the same time contend that focusing on any single ion channel is foolhardy at best, like picking a woman, or a man, a stranger, out of a crowd on the street at random from a great distance through binoculars and deciding you love her or him. You mean to say it is impossible to predict the state of any single ion channel at a moment in time. Fine, you say. That's not that different from a longing for an unknown someone (or something) that is impossible to fulfill. But fine. You're pretty frustrated, angry even, excited perhaps by the inhibition you encounter, an inhibition which grows with the excitement of the arrival of more and more yours (we're only trying to fire one fucking neuron here let alone all the neurons that need be fired to encode and transport the scream you supposedly screamed (discomfitingly loudly) but which may as well as of yet not exist since whatever's on the other side of this auditory nerve bundle has not received, processed, reconstructed, or heard you, let alone repunctuated your string for personal optimization or unraveled or conjectured what your dim signal means if anything) which increases the potential incrementally. (You wonder, If on a snowy winter's night an ear doesn't hear you scream in greeting do you make a noise? If you invest all of yourself in the scream, if you become your scream, and if you are yet unheard by a perhaps inanimate organ, do you cease to exist?, you continue. Shutup, we shout, and achieve your action potential and fire this

neuron and perpetuate your signal or we're gonna die in this infernal nerve.) So you've opened some number of voltage-gated sodium ion channels, or some percentage, or you probably have, god let's hope at least probably. We're talking about the population average behavior, not any one channel, any one you, an individual channel can in principle make any transition anytime, but it's not the principle that matters but the probability. Christ get on with it we say to you. The kinetics of the sodium channels are governed by a transition matrix whose rates are voltage dependent. Since the channels both are effected by voltage (their open/closed state) and affect voltage by admitting cations, the whole thing gets recursive and though (partial?) differential equations (beginning with the Hodgkin-Hutley equations) have been developed to model channel behavior, you're not going to attempt and fail to elucidate them because we will not permit it. We have lives, or had. Sodium ions enter the cell, finally, praise be, as the membrane potential increases. Unfortunately, potassium ion channels also open and K^+ , at a higher intracellular concentration, exits. The inward flow of Na^+ increases the concentration of positively charged cations in the cell and causes depolarization; the outward flow of K^+ does the opposite, hyperpolarizing the membrane, counteracting your attempt to drive the polarization or voltage closer to 0, Ø, null, nil and activate your potential. For small voltage increases, potassium current exceeds sodium current and voltage returns to its resting value, ~ -70 mV, and you are defeated, gone, dissipated, decayed, accomplishmentless, at 2. Let's decide that is not the case in this case or you would have to stop communicating with us because you'd be nonexistent and you will have wasted your time and ours. It's all or nothing, either 1 or 0, fire the neuron or die. Congratulations, you and the other yous combine forces to cross the -55 mV threshold which initiates the positive feedback loop whereby the sodium current activates more sodium channels and the potassium channels are slow to respond and the membrane is rapidly depolarized, firing, producing an action potential. Yes, yes, back to a feedback loop, but it's the only way you as probabilistic voltage-gated ion channels are capable of producing you as action potential. Yes, yes, the potential is rising, action is rising, sodium rushing in, your voice charging out like a cough or hiccup or sneeze, the lagging potassium not reining you in, your excitement becoming less negative, your voltage difference more non-negative, zero, even positive, yes, you are greater than zero, !, exclamatory even, capable of epiphanies (the membrane potential controls the state of the ion channels but the state of the ion channels controls the membrane potential!) and as more and more Na^+ enters the cell at your axon hillock, the membrane is further depolarized, opening more and more voltage-gated ion channels admitting more and more Na^+ and further depolarizing the membrane,

swamping the bothersome K⁺ efflux and you are firing oh god yes you are firing explosively ecstatically once and forever creating a current so much larger than the initial electrical stimulus you brought to this hillock, a small rise whose amplitude is now multiplied, become action potential, a 1, codified. Your amplitude, duration, and shape are determined primarily by properties of the membrane rather than characteristics of your former stimulus. Codified, remember, spatially and temporally, recall, you as a scream have been split into innumerable 1s and 0s, subdivided into an indecipherable (by us) patter of all-or-nothings. It is perhaps unfortunate that so many of you also have to die, to be nothing, but take solace: it is your absence, your nothingness, your zeroes that give your ones value, that make the rest of us, of you, something, that give us, you, meaning, that harder yes that action there the rising the electricity the firing -- there is no harder or higher or value greater than one, there is no greater fired than fired, all sodium channels are open on average and the concentration of sodium is approximately at equilibrium across the membrane and therefore there is no longer a net sodium flow and now your extreme elevated voltage is shutting your sodium ion channels while continuing to open your potassium channels and the potassium is leaving and taking with it their charge, taking with it the membrane potential, and the membrane's voltage is falling fast, falling to rest, repolarizing and then hyperpolarizing the membrane and preventing bounce back, and the membrane potential is decayed, and again you would be dead if that were all you are, but you leave that you behind, you are action potential propagating as a wave into and through adjacent sections of membrane, along the axon, depolarizing adjoining axon membrane without decay, being constantly replenished by the positive feedback loop of voltage-gated sodium ion channels as you propagate, progressing without weakening, you will never die!, down the axon hillock and into the axon trunk wrapped in a myelin sheath. Faced with the myelin sheath insulating the axon, impermeating it, preventing the passage of ions across the membrane, halting the tidal wave of sodium, you fear a wall absorption death, but no, you jump suddenly to a break in the myelin sheath, a node, saltas in saltatory conduction, essentially instantaneously, moving so much faster than you were before that you are not aware of your passage, cannot feel your acceleration, one moment you're there and the next there, from Node of Ranvier to Node of Ranvier (from one interruption in the insulation of the neuron to the next), at each node boosting your signal because you did weaken in the jump, you propagating as electrotonic potential, practically electricity in a biological wire, jumping through the cytoplasm, your progress quite frankly astonishingly fast but your strength attenuating, but as said at this node you get a shot in the arm, another positive feedback and action potential regeneration via

sodium influx and back into the wormhole of a myelin sheath you go, popping up at another node and reenergized back into darkness and out into light reactivated and recharged and back into the hole and really the engineering here is brilliant you think as the intelligent design dawns on you, or rather the design that leads to intelligence, the evolution of intelligence, the evolution of a system whose design leads to intelligence, not design, happenstance, this another mechanism in a host of random and redundant and nonsensical and often inefficient and incomprehensible and perhaps unintelligent mechanisms (if this is a design it's a dumb one) that generate comprehension, external awareness, and then awareness of self and relation of self to surroundings and in no short order to whatever consciousness is, the awareness of which (of the, or a, mechanism of intelligence or consciousness or awareness) increases however incrementally your consciousness, or your consciousness of yourself, or your self-consciousness, skipping and ducking into darkness and reappearing farther on like a leprechaun chasing the end of the rainbow through an ocean of clover or a seal in the ice-chocked sea hoping no polar bear lurks over its breathing holes or a tortured man whose head is shoved down in the toilet and near to drowning (don't forget how weak you become nearing a node; the possibility exists that you will not make it, dissipated in darkness, charge lost, electromotive force dampened, friction there must be friction here somewhere opposing you) is yanked up again by the hair for a gasped breath and shoved back under (yes you lose the sense of forward motion but you only travel an inch in this neuron). You are discontinuous. You are conducted saltatorily, thrust into the myelinated darkness and before you know it yanked by the Ranvier to the apex of the neuronal rollercoaster and again released into myelinated free fall screaming -- for axons of a given diameter (larger than a minimum diameter of $\sim 1\mu\text{m}$) myelination increases conduction velocities of action potential tenfold. Conversely, or else inversely, perhaps logically, for a given conduction velocity myelinated axons will have smaller diameters than unmyelinated axons (space is a limiting factor ensconced underground, and the smaller our nerves the more of us we can pack into these confines, increasing our density, maximizing and minimizing our space). Furthermore, since myelin prevents ions from entering or leaving the axon through ion channels, said ions (our Na^+ and K^+) need not be continuously pumped across the cell membrane to maintain the proper resting concentration gradient and voltage difference, except at the Nodes of Ranvier, saving metabolic energy, a considerable selective advantage (the human nervous system uses approximately 20% of its body's metabolic energy) (which is not to say, you emphasize, that you are in a human nervous system despite all appearances, let alone a body). Brought back from myelin unconsciousness at

the axon terminal, defibrillated post roller coaster, you rear up at the presynaptic membrane, revived via the involuntary positive feedback loop, and in the rising open voltage-gated calcium channels. Ca⁺² flows into the cell and vesicles of stored neurotransmitters migrate to and meld with the membrane and you are disgorged into another synaptic cleft, a chemical again, a physical being, a piece of matter, slow and unelectric, into the gap between a cochlear nerve and some unique dendrite of the cochlear nucleus. There, you are now where you said you were. But with deeper understanding. You have simplified the process immensely and you will continue to deepen your simplification; you'd like to stay focused and you'd like us to understand you, in which case we must dismiss those processes and characteristics and acronyms and kinds of physics that we cannot understand. Each of the 10^{11} (one hundred billion) neurons in the human brain has an average of 7000 synaptic connections to other neurons. It has been estimated that the brain of a three-year-old, if you have one, has about 10^{15} synapses (one quadrillion), while an adult has between 10^{14} and 5×10^{14} (100 to 500 trillion) synapses. One of which you are presently in. Whether you are in a human brain or not. It just seems doubtful considering the underground and whatever. And the time this is taking. Still, there are similarities. In anatomy. Physiology of nervous system. Enough with action potentials. You know you were/are one, a one, one of many, ones and zeros, up/down, on/off, all/nothing, 1/0, deconstructed and/or reconstituted. Sometime, eventually, one day, presently, right now as you go on and on, you are added and mixed with other signals, develop relationships, overlap, intertwine, fire back and forth, become a concept superimposed on your biology, stepping a level (a story) up from these neurotic confines, though physically you are still many discrete tiny units, electrical charges, action potential and action potential and action potential, and pass from stimulation into knowledge, unless you're completely forgotten, without a residue of you residing in memory, which happens to all of us eventually. Though once you reside in memory, it is thought that you are no longer myriad action potentials, but a conditioning of the system, a training of neurons to more easily reproduce or accept action potentials that approximate your general pattern. And lastly again consider the evolutionary advantage of being an action potential (velocity of up to 110 m/s, one-third the speed of sound in air under normal environmental conditions), rather than a hormone (velocity of approximately 8 m/s in large arteries), or a man (walking at 3 miles/hr on foot or 60 miles/hr in automobile or several times the speed of sound in fighter jets), not to mention that being an all-or-nothing signal that does not decay with transmission distance (digital electronics, repetition without cost) is what confers

on you the status of being the commodity (except you are not a tangible thing exactly and you're not talking derivatives or futures or hedging), of being the digital currency then of the neural network. You'd go deeper into the economic metaphor and into what you mean as an individual action potential, how your scream has been deconstructed into 1s and 0s, how you've been coded, how you conform to the system and the system conforms to you, but you've said it all before and more than once and to say something novel and insightful about yourself at this point in time, which is lasting a long time, you'd have to get into statistical methods and probability theory and stochastic point processes and -- fuck, is this synaptic cleft that wide, the gap that immense, or are you just that small -- you've said so much already that we don't understand, even if you said we did, and you don't want us to leave you all alone in the abyss, or rather buried in a neural network. Dirt. You are all around you but you've been run through a sieve, quantized into tony corpuscles and you cannot tell yourself from yourself. Don't worry, delineating is the function of this brain or neural network or whatever It is. You arrive at varying loci within the cochlea nuclear complex (which is tonotopically organized), ipsilaterally located in the medulla of the brainstem (the axons from the lower frequency region of the cochlea innervate the ventral portion of the dorsal cochlear nucleus and the ventrolateral portions of the anteroventral cochlear nucleus, while the higher frequency axons project into the dorsal portion of the anteroventral cochlear nucleus and the uppermost dorsal portions of the dorsal cochlear nucleus; mid-frequency projections land between), and branch and bounce thenceforth through the trapezoid body and into the superior olivary complex in the pons (the lateral superior olive important in detecting interaural level difference and the medial superior olive important in distinguishing interaural time difference), transmitted in code and decode and recode and hypercode by the lateral lemniscus axons that finally deliver disparate you bit by bit from your different pathways to the midbrain inferior colliculi, which integrate you (if partially, to process sound source localization from the superior olivary complex and dorsal cochlear nucleus) and relay you to the thalamus and the primary auditory cortex in the left posterior superior temporal gyrus, specifically the Bradman areas, where your pitch and rhythm are perceived, which is surrounded by the secondary auditory cortex, which connects you with other processing areas in the superior temporal gyrus, the superior temporal sulcus, middle temporal gyrus, and the frontal lobe, which distinguishes you as speech or music or scream or noise, and to all other parts of the brain as appropriate. You can't get any more specific, to do so would emphasize the humanity of this brain, this unit of perception, and there is no promise of humanity, and you are approaching the limits of knowledge, and

besides you are now less yourself than you were, you are sensed perceived processed interpreted consumed integrated into this unknown being, the ear of which projects from the ground. The sound, the vibration, is long gone except for your potential oscillation of neurons. You live on in Its memory, if you do, if you can call having affected some synaptic plasticity living, synaptic connections perpetually strengthening or weakening through such mechanisms as long term potentiation (the most simple and well-understood mechanism of which is increasing the number and sensitivity of the postsynaptic glutamate receptors NMDA and AMPA ((you simplify and fail to illuminate because you don't actually care if we understand or not, complete comprehension is impossible, you are imbedded, all of you, us, we, the effluvia of memories of actions, traces of alteration in conformations))) or long term depression or spike-timing independent plasticity. You've perhaps strengthened and/or weakened synapses. You are no longer a charge or action potential but biophysical changes in a network's connections that facilitate or inhibit synaptic transmission, an engram that houses a memory of you, you are not yours but Its, a reflection of your scream, changing every time you are recalled, changed by the act of recalling, you are a feedback loop, still easing or impeding transmission along certain pathways if you're not forgotten and thereby affecting the collective consciousness of the being we inhabit, dying yourself when this neural network into which you have been consolidated, or which you inhabit, or of which you are a small structural member such as a piece of hardware at a joint, or which you've remodeled or has remodeled you, you've conditioned and been conditioned, dies, unless It transmits you, yes changed and not you but a faint echo of you, in voice or song or writing or touch or one day perhaps in extrasensory perception or an intra-collective-consciousness communication, some communication that is not you but bears evidence of you, how you moved, a wave an echoing scream whose origin is unknown and irredeemable, or what of genetic communication, how you slightly altered a tertiary protein structure which perhaps slightly altered other protein conformations which slightly altered Its genetic material which probably propagates sexually and/or asexually, in which case you persist if not live (in all cases you end by not living), unaware, having given your awareness to the ground (or having given your scream to the ground and your awareness to nothing), as a physiological change, as strengthened (or weakened) synapses or network connections (yes yes again again), as innate unconscious memory or conditioned response or instinct, as a longing disassociated from you, a screamless scream, in which case you achieve an immortality you are unaware of, because other then being a genetic modifier, an extra few NMDA receptors, a new neuron worming in the ephemeral cortex

or in what you once prayed was the eternally regenerating or evolving mechanism of higher consciousness, you are nothing, long dead and forgotten, passed down and changed and passed down. Or not passed down. You wait to, expect to, try to enact something profound, perhaps a meeting of the minds with this being you are now a part of, but there is only action potential, ones and zeroes, firing back and forth, slight conditionings of the system, and what is remembered retold repeated recoded deconstructed refurbished reconstructed and degraded is Its construct on a higher or different plane. You wait until you are not you, and we are not we, but It. You know only spikes of voltage, waves of ions, concentration gradients, and the exocytosis of vesicles. You don't know It. You are a piece of Its machinery. You are biology. You know nothing.

183.

Catch up to your shadow, to the man embodying the scream, to the scream creator who precedes you into the house, your progenitor if no longer your master, your author, the higher consciousness leeching off your consciousness, the paternal or parasitic awareness who props itself up with or brandishes your world like a gnarled walking stick -- catch up to him as he returns to himself in the chair and pulls the plug of compression cuff life support or checks to make sure the plug has been pulled, as he gazes longingly at himself missing an ear and five fingers and eyelids in the chair, as he stands before himself, a dead mutilated reflection, and stares hungrily at the pizza box in his lap in the chair, and then picks the box up and opens it and finds it empty but for crusts and dumps the crusts on the adjacent desk and sets the box atop them, and end him without hesitation by driving two fingers up through the soft skin under his chin and through his palette and into his brain. Whisk your fingertips in his frontal lobe to lobotomize him and end him all the sooner. Too late think to plunge your stub into his chest and crush his lungs to end his scream, the scream, before it's screamed. Breath flees out the trachea, through the mouth around your fingers, past the lips yet slightly parted, absconding with his sound into the wide world. Impaled on your fingers, lifted off the ground, he screams. You quake with the vibration, holding him aloft statuesquely, blood trickling down your arm, his wind blowing by your two fingers, tongue quivering between your fingers, your fingers his second vocal chords, your particles oscillating in unison, you his instigator or muse or antagonist, his mouth yours, you his organ, his voice yours, you him, he your scream, you for a moment complete. You drop your hand and he slips from your fingers to the ground. You pause, wait for a noise to come from you, to discover if you're changed, if you've claimed the sensory powers omitted you, if you are no longer mute, if you are no longer deaf. You wait for a

sound emitted by your vibration, a response to the scream, a faint echo. Nothing. Your silence is absolute. You encountered the scream, caused it, and it shook you -- your eyes glistened and the hair on your neck stood on end and your legs nearly buckled -- but you feel no different than before. The room smelled of you, of decomposition, before you arrived, and it does still. You created your scream. You killed your author. You ended your story. But here you are yet. Now what? Why go, why stay? On the desk are papers bearing words that contain you. Do they still? You are scrawled illegibly and incoherently on post-it notes. Language defining you when you are without language. It's degrading, your DNA unzipped and splayed naked on a table, the complimentary strands spread wide, read, transcribed, translated, applied, your desire sated, or his, and you left used and empty and fluttering on the desk. You are a slurry of fucked jottings. The words tell you what you've done. Are they instructions or record? The words tell you nothing. A knotted string of letters. You crumple a page, a handful of pages, all the pages, and throw them away. Nothing changes. You are not crumpled. As you retrieve and smooth and read words that say you deflect a dog with annoyance like a fly as it leaps into the room, you deflect a dog with annoyance like a fly as it leaps into the room. Why kill, why not kill? You found your scream, and if you failed to end it before it began, so what? You did what you sought; you executed the despot spelling out what you sought. Your tasks are terminated, your texts deposed. Now what? You still feel ruled, minus the rules. You disposed of the words but there are still words. You killed the eye, but you feel watched. Its empty eyes bulge out of their sockets at your feet and weight on your shoulders. What other eyes compose the eye that drinks off your consciousness? Can you slay them too? The scream has been screamed. You have no need for another, but searching for a scream is all you know. Purpose fulfilled, what do you do? Liberty gained, where do you go?

184.

Inertia governs you. You go to 184. You make a choice to exit before you have to kill the dog, probably your dead author's dog, who while annoying reminds you of the petulant, three-headed Cerberus soothed by Orpheus's song. Where do these thoughts come from if you no longer have anyone to blame for them but yourself? You pass though a wall and out into a field. You close your eye to not decide which direction to walk. You walk. You wander forever with nothing to seek, nothing to please, nothing to fight. The fountainhead becomes a dry, distant, longago pinprick. You are the eye and ears and nose and mouth and skin of a void. You have nothing to give your consciousness to. Nevertheless it drips. Should you characterize the one you killed as victim, governor, sponge,

deity, sink, author, well, puppeteer, or witness? Is your empty sense of being its empty sense of being? You are an echo of it, or it is an echo of you. Your life is, was, its life, it had none of its own, nor did you, but you killed it. What of the weight, of the eye? Is it dead weight? Is it a composite eye? You wander the world, killing and not killing in turn, searching for nothing. You wander, silent among the bluebells ringing and the pink and purple and magenta and violet and white and nearly blue hyacinth trumpeting and brass daffodils tromboning and tulips singing. Which means you are in the flower garden and you haven't gone very far, or it is still spring and it hasn't been very long, or you have and it has and you've come back. You are mapless, instructionless, narrativeless, authorless, directionless, tongueless, hearingless, speechless, timeless, placeless, antagonistless, purposeless, defianceless. You forever lessen without the mercy of zeroing. You have a hooked walking stick, one hand, and an eye. You are Death, you sometimes think, and death isn't a choice; you cannot die. You don't know where to go, don't know your options. You don't know where to begin, or where to end.

185.

On your East Neighbor's door you knock. Your mother yelled at you enough to not ring the doorbell, the baby might be asleep, don't start her screaming, or else it was your wife that trained you to not ring the doorbell, or you trained yourself while training your children to not make the baby scream.

While you wait, you look up. The stars are out, which means it's clear, which means it's colder than it could have been, and colding. You're gonna be a successful detective.

You wonder why stars are brighter when it's cold out.

When your East Neighbor doesn't answer the door, you ring the doorbell. Sometimes you just have to wake the baby and make her scream. Sometimes you have to make the baby scream to discover if she screamed. You plunder your memory while you wait. Your East Neighbor has no baby. Your East Neighbor is two people. A man and a woman. Husband and wife? They don't have a baby; they're your mother's age at least. For several years -- five, six? -- they kept a baby in the house while they gradually added first a toddler, then a kindergartener, then a soccer player. What happened to the baby? Did they trade it in? How long ago was that? Twenty years? More? Less? Did you live in your house then? Were you an adult, a mature functioning contributor to society and economy? There are no more children there. Since when? Since tonight? Post-scream or pre-scream?

It is now that you see your East Neighbors' car is not parked in front of their

house, the car you've seen more than your neighbor, the old Volvo diesel station wagon that's survived through drivers quitting on diesel in their passenger vehicles, survived citizens switching their station wagon preference from Volvo to Subaru, survived the cultural realignment of consumers with children decisively choosing minivans over station wagons, and later again decisively choosing behemoth SUVs over minivans and station wagons. Why, you ask yourself. Why the abandonment of the station wagon? Don't ask why, you tell yourself, but acknowledge that station wagons, minus the Subaru, which having disavowed its boxy shape resembles a sedan more than the boat of a Chevy station wagon your father drove with the red ceiling cloth drooping down in your face as you fought with your siblings to sit in the rear-facing seat and vomit face-to-face with tailgating drivers, are perhaps forever gone. As perhaps are your neighbors who kept the memory of station wagons alive. With the scream.

You pound on the door with your walking stick. You hear nothing. You feel the inklings or residue of an ear infection. Can a scream infect you? You step back from the door. Your East Neighbors' house looks a lot like your house. Maybe a few inches shorter. A front door flanked by two windows, two second story windows above, a peaked roof. To the right: another likeminded house, a long row of likeminded houses shrinking as they recede. To the left: the same, likeminded houses shrinking as far as the eye can see. If you could press a button to make all the likeminded houses disgorge their contents out their doorways and onto the street, perhaps you'd identify a perpetrator, or a victim, or you'd nab the scream, or perhaps it would be pandemonium, screams ricocheting off one another while houses puked accumulations. Perhaps you would push such a button if it existed, but it does not.

There is no light on in the house you face. Which of these likeminded houses is yours? It might help while chasing the scream to remember where you came from. It's either the house on the right or the left of the one before you. Which? You can figure this out; you're a detective. You walked _____ out your door, turned _____, toward your _____ Neighbors', then turned _____, to walk up their _____ with your _____ stick to their door. Your _____, therefore, you're relatively _____, is the house to the _____ as you face your _____ house. You write your house's relative position down in case it proves handy.

You conclude that your _____ Neighbor isn't answering the door.

Undeterred, you open the door and enter 176.

Undeterred, you go to your _____ Neighbor's front door at _____.

186.

The thing about words is this: it's not that they lie, though they do do that, if not anymore than anyone to their children to get them out the door or to themselves to get up in the morning and not quit wholeheartedly; they tell the truth too like any mirror. Nor is it that they are given to misinterpretation, which they are; on average you are aware of all the different interpretations and choose precisely that imprecise word because you intend all the different interpretations concurrently, or else that's the word that comes to you in the moment and you've got no beef with other interpretations; you aren't alone in this world after all. It's not that you can't describe anything tangible or real, an object, with words, which you can't, nor can anyone; you've never encountered nor formed a convincing mental image from words in your life and you dare yourself to attempt to describe a face so you'd recognize it on the street – your defiance isn't dead yet, no; your defiance is all that's keeping you alive, if you are. The thing about words is they don't hit the nail on the head. There it is, you don't want them, you don't want words, you want hammers and nails and silence and to be working hard and building and hammering and nailing even if screws are more secure because the pounding is satisfying as is the ache and flexing and strength of your forearm. You don't want to use words, you want to build something useful, something that will last, and you fear words are insufficient to the task.

187.

Giddy with progress, you succinctly ask in the spirit of inquiry, Why?

Heady with your streak of fortune and self-actualization, and with all five fingers, you answer,

Why? Go to 100.

188.

Perplexed, you clarify patiently, Why was there a scream?

Sure that this question is no different than the last and unclear why your pinky was removed, you lose your patience,

It's a byproduct, a side effect, a condition of living. Go to 102.

189.

It's okay, you still have three fingers on the one hand, and all five on the other, just give it your best effort, you monotone while groping for the finger that fell under your chair, Why this scream?

Tears dripping down your cheek, unable to stop trembling, staring into the

light waiting for an answer to save you and hearing nothing, you admit,
I don't know. Go to 104.

190.

Letting your fingers drop from your hand like hairs pulled from your mashed potatoes, you turn away from you and scream at the wall, Why are there screams?, and, Why did you hear a scream?, and, Why, if you didn't?, and, Why when there are so many natural screams in the world did you manufacture one?

Letting your hand go limp, closing your eyes, exhaling, ceasing to cry, you collect yourself and answer,

There is no answer that will satisfy you. Go to 106.

191.

You rest your head in your blood-spattered hands and leave the cigar cutter to dangle from your thumb and ask the question you don't want to ask, the question that demands an answer, the question you cannot answer, Why scream?

You sigh in resignation or boredom or pain management and inside you go somewhere else, exit through the pain, absent yourself, while on the surface you are unresponsive and silent.

Go to 110.

192.

Outside, it is cold and dark. Because it is winter and late, relatively. Not late winter, as far as you know.

You walk with your walking stick down your front walk to the sidewalk, waiting until the last possible moment to decide which way you'll walk. Waiting for another to make the decision, waiting for a limitation, waiting for an indication that one choice is better than another.

You wear your wool winter coat, your wool scarf someone knit for you, your wool stocking hat that you've lost repeatedly. Your wool gloves are in your pockets. You are not unprepared. You do not act rashly. You wear boots of one variety or another. You also wear pants and a shirt, etc., underwear, but you don't need to decide all that now, boxers, briefs, boxer briefs, cotton, flannel, polypropylene, wool blend, polyester, silk, plaid, striped, whitey tighties, polka-dotted, animated, solid, see-through, tummy control, g-string, etc., nothing -- it all gets to be too much.

You turn right and go to your East Neighbor's house at
185.

You left your house going north you detect -- you're a detective.

You turn left and go to your West Neighbor's house at
181.

193.

You're not sure if you're looking into the square handkerchief or staring unfocused into the middle distance of the unbounded formless gray. You flip the small plane of gray in your hand over and it is eyeless. Empty. You scream. The Women of Gray are not eyeless. As they see or she sees you, you blow your nose into the handkerchief with a honking expulsion of mucus loosened or undammed or secreted or phase-changed to liquid or created from nothing by tears for you feel all is lost. The gray women trumpet and unfold their mighty wings and take flight with great wide long ungainly lumbering flaps that somehow heft their bulk from the bench and free them from Earth. Airborne, they achieve a swirling grace. Your three Women of Gray are joined by hundreds, thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of other gray women trumpeting and unfolding their wings and coalescing in the gray, taking form, shaping gray, articulating liftoff, flowing into the rising swirl in a mesmerizing geometry, following an order you cannot perceive, attuned to a pattern mathematical, guided by an instinctual motivation or intimate internal impetus to react to the position and velocity of all adjacent sisters, leap now and flap and curve to this angle and tuck in behind that bird and elevate at such and such a rate and adjust angular velocity a fraction in reflection of the telltales of other swans. You witness the exertion of a great cumulative force. The air throbs with their flap. The chamber resounds with their trumpet. The sky is viscous with the vortex of their flight. Then they are gone. Silence. They've taken the gray with them, except the small gray square you hold and fill with your snot and crumple and are about to discard, throw down, but onto what? The gray flew away, leaving nothing. No walls, no non-walls, no ground, no ambiguous sky, no featurelessness, no depthless immediacy, not a park bench to sit on, nowhere to go forever, no definition between you and the nothing, no way to get back into the Labyrinth proper to wander until you die for something to do, go to 2, soon nothing to talk about. You wish you'd chosen differently. Perhaps you confused your authorial center with your readerly center, but is there a difference? Your power dawns on you. This is the adventure end you chose, but is it the adventure end you choose?

194.

You heard a scream.

Without contemplation, leap to 0.333...

Without reflection, leap into 0.666...

Contemplate and reflect yourself to 16.

194.50.

Bellerophon. Read up on Bellerophon. Write your own version of Bellerophon twisted or emphasized or stylized or rewritten to parallel or mirror or entangle your story.

195.

Every choice is a loss of thousands of other choices. The possibilities of what your life can be narrow, becoming fewer and fewer as time goes by until they become singular, definitive, the possibility realized, final, your life in the past dead, your life in the now nearly dead, your life in the future a near-at-hand dead end at 2, your other lives unlived and nonexistent to you.

195.

You go back to doing what you were doing before the scream. Reading, or whatever.

195.

You live a long life. A life uninteresting as story. A life uninteresting for others to experience because, for one, it is a life a lot like theirs. (You get married if you weren't, or you don't, have kids if you hadn't, or don't, lose and find jobs you could do without except you can't do without a job for long.) For two, your life has no narrative engine, no arc, because it is life, not story. It is a life, your life, and you do not deserve to be subjugated to a compelling narrative. Your life is always compelling to you in the moment you are living it, even when it is boring or tedious or tiresome, which it frequently is, because your boredom and weariness eats at your soul, and being consumed is a compelling experience, one which will occasionally compel you to action, to change your life, which will be interesting for a while until the new life becomes boring or tedious or tiresome, because it is life and not an amusement park, which also get boring or tedious or tiresome. You are often choosing to change something, even if you are unable to, even if it's your own state-of-mind in an attempt to accept your life and embrace contentment and not become a bitter old person who spreads discontentment to get back at the world. You don't want to become that person, even if your life is as defined by choices you didn't make (such as if you are laid off from the job you loathe or your non-wife gets pregnant despite your best efforts or your true-wife has an affair and leaves you or you are seduced by the

dream of home ownership and real-estate investment and equity accrual and an ever-ascending market with infinite capacity for growth and when you buy the bubble bursts) as the ones you did (getting married, though love is a function of where you choose to be at certain times and who you therefore encounter and in what mood and where she or he chooses to be at certain times and what pastimes you pursue and your career objectives and whether you can agree on a definition for periwinkle and who you happen to be attracted to and if you are compatible in bed and if you can withstand the sight of each other in the morning as well as many other mundane quotidian everyday variables you don't have the time or fortitude to contemplate, getting a job, turning down a job, what corporations you elect to support, where and on what you spend your money, whether or not your primary concern is economic, deciding how to maximize the value of your life), because your contentment is important to you, if always slipping from your grasp, if less important than ... your effect? your mark? your substance?

Even if your life is a cycle of weariness, boredom, and suffocation, and it probably is, if broken by flirtations with joy and fulfillment and dare you say contentment, you never choose to go to 2 to start over, because you know there is no starting over, there is only end, and you will arrive there regardless so why not stave it off for as long as possible, which is not forever, for those moments that rise above the slog and to experience what there is to experience. You eventually succumb, probably to cancer or hospital-induced infection. You choose or don't choose long in advance to not be kept alive on life support and painkillers for a few extra weeks so all your relatives can come to the hospital and say goodbye to you, a non-you, gasping open-mouthed, comatose, fluid-filled lungs rattling, unaware, already expelled. You choose or don't choose to tell your progeny to not embalm you and save your body in a box in the ground but to dump your body in the Ganges, or short of that put you raw in the Earth for the worms and fungi and bacteria, or short of that abide by the law and not pollute or fertilize water or land but cremate you and scatter your ashes on some mountaintop. You feel like a burden before you die but you can't help it. None of your loved ones complain of the burden out loud, not within earshot, because they love you, whether or not they force you into assisted living for a few years while you deteriorate. You justify your persistence with those aforementioned moments that rose above the slog, the moments you may not have created or experienced or known if you had become a detective (you'll never know) and set out on an adventure to silence an already silent scream. Moments like sex, babies, children, fleeting epiphanies, passing but recurring gardening peace, building something with your hands, reading or hearing or watching the rare tale that shocks you from the humdrum, lifts you out of the morass, moves you

(where? to another possible world perhaps or an elevated emotional state or an insightful intellectual precipice), and in conclusion returns you to your life asking, What for? and, For what? Mundane things that despite their mundaneness and how they exasperate and stifle you (work and family, family and work) also give your life meaning. A five-year-old's drawing of rhinoceroses battling, of a house in the woods with an apple tree under a rainbow mountain and the deep blue vault of outer space where an eyeball of an Earth looks down on it all, of a many-headed dragon facing off against a knight, of snakes with long spiraling tails. Rare recognition from peers amid unappreciated hours and days and years of working; rarer instances of feeling the work is useful, worthwhile, in some way beneficial to humanity. Children chasing dinosaurs on the beach and dragons in the woods. Being alive when your mother dies. A three-year-old making a theatrical fake mad face at you and laughing maniacally. Never marrying and being self-sufficient, or marrying and your marriage surviving marital arguments that include but are not limited to slamming, throwing, cursing, and screaming, or marrying and your marriage failing and you living through terminal marital strife, exiting what you thought was forever, and learning how to live again. Your pride in your children; your pride in never having children. A child asking you to read them a story in the middle of you cooking dinner, your exasperated response, and then the child learning to read without you, reacquainting you with silence, not asking you anymore. Graduations, weddings, children's children, if they have them, if you live to see them. A lot of books. The joy of giving an infant some book to chew on to relieve the pain of cutting teeth. Perhaps every once in a while something happens to you at work, or you do something at work, accomplish an accomplishment (there are a few jobs where accomplishment is possible) that makes working worthwhile (yes back to this again but you have to get up and go to work day after day, year after year) besides providing the necessities of life (money if you're lucky and purpose or at least tasks and self-definition or at least occupation). There are a few jobs where doing something valuable for people is possible, where helping people is possible, where the betterment of life, or if not that then providing the necessities of life for others is possible. You might work one. But you probably do not, and you never will unless you make the effort, the choice, to attempt to do so. Maybe you inspire an acquaintance who doesn't know you well. Maybe you take your adolescent fishing, you who cannot fish, or take your teenager hiking, you who cannot find time to be alone in wilderness, or take your children to zoo after zoo to see lions in artificial savannahs, white-cheeked gibbons in glassed-off enclosures, eagles in cages. Maybe your children if you have them grow up and listen to your music and read your books and

disagree with your taste. In your life you cling to views from mountaintops or to views from beaches or to views from benches. To experiencing foreign cities, exotic to you and mundane to their inhabitants, and then to the memory of them. There is sex with your spouse or your partner or your significant other, holding her ponytail, holding his face, on a mountaintop, a bench, a beach, an exotic city, the mundane city, sex mostly soon forgotten but occasionally memorable, though you do not know which is which except upon later reflection. Which is true of all your experiences. Which is not to glorify sex, which is another element of life which justifies life, but no more so than lying on your back on the ground in the sun and staring at the sky or a hug from one of the few who truly love you, and probably less.

You think of the scream every once in a while, less and less all the time, though there is a period later in life, after you retire or when you are an empty-nester or are otherwise more alone than you have been since you were a twenty-something yet to settle, a time when you have time and little else that requires doing but reflection and contemplation, when you think about the scream more and more. You wonder if the scream was something or nothing. You wonder if you let someone die or saved them and yourself and everyone some unnecessary irritation. You wonder if the scream was ever screamed again. You wonder what happened or if nothing happened. You don't know, but you don't know what happened to your life either; you don't know what happened to the things that did happen. You saw one of your neighbors (you cannot remember your east neighbor from your west anymore and both are now long gone) frequently after the scream (you think it was after the scream) because you two became close for a time after he got divorced, or his wife left him, or he swore off relationships, or human interaction but for a weekly drink with you. The other neighbor you never saw again, as far as you can recollect, like you never saw him before the scream. Everyone has moved away, or moved on, except you. The cops came around eventually, though it may've taken a few days, but they didn't knock on your door, which hurt your feelings at the time, though you may not have answered, or maybe you didn't hear their knocking. Maybe you preferred to not be interrupted in whatever you were doing. You think of the adventures you could have had. You long for them, even though you know you don't know if the adventures would have been adventurous or miserable, even though you know that if you went on an adventure never to return you would now be longing for the domestic experiences, the seemingly mundane life you led, the small moments you cherish that you would never have had the opportunity to live. Your wife if you had one might have left you; your children if you had them would have been unknown to you. You would have given up the chance to make

infinitesimal differences for the risk of making a single big and perhaps impossible and possibly irrelevant difference. Your life wasn't so bad, you tell yourself. You brought new life into the world, one way or another. You saw lily pads in lakes, elephants in walls, wolves in the wild. You saw red clouds and fluorescent coral and white rivers and black sands and lava. You saw babies fresh from the womb; you saw your wife nearly die; your mother died. Loved ones died and you grieved. You put off too many things you wanted to do until you retired: fixing up a boat and learning to sail, traveling to Southeast Asia, buying a few acres in the country and raising a few horses and a cow, writing a novel, living in Spain or Bolivia or Nicaragua or anywhere else and teaching English, going back to school to study what you now wish you had wanted to study at the age when you're supposed to study and learn but don't want to study anything except experiencing life, selling everything and living on what you can carry on your back and discovering something no one else has ever discovered. (You're not sure when exactly you gave up on life being what you once thought it could be, or making of it what you once thought could be made, or doing what you once thought could be done, when the possibilities collapsed, but you're fairly certain your loss of idealism or hope or ambition or innocence or reason to strive occurred in the temporal vicinity of the scream.) And then you never retired, and you don't last very long once you do. In another life, you say. Those are lives for different worlds, you reassure yourself. One can't do everything in one life, you have learned. You have to make choices, you tell your children, because you don't have very many chances to make choices that aren't made for you and the only thing you get to choose is what to do when you get to choose, which is more often than you will choose to admit. You have only one life to live, you tell your dogs, spreading your wisdom, depositing your life like another grain of sand on a sandy beach lapped by ocean, and without making a conscious choice free from historical influence and external authority before taking action, you do not truly exist as human, even though such a choice is impossible, even though you are a human with an unexplainable unending longing who strives to make free choices until you go to 2.

196.

The unavoidable truth is you prefer stories that you understand. And so you say it straight, not only that but you scream it, absolutely, absolutely you scream it, though there is little absolutism or absolution or Absolute in this world, but you say your absolute truth straight without obfuscation or ambiguity or relativity or agnosticism or probability or existentialism, no, you scream, and in your succinctly worded scream is the knowledge that some of your choices are

meaningless and some are not and some are both and some are not choices (some are matter and some are nomatter and of these some you can distinguish as matter or nomatter and some you will never know ((of these, some you know you'll never know and some you don't know you'll never know (((some you don't know are choices))))) except in retrospect and sometimes not then) and some consequential and of those some you can prognosticate the resultant consequence with a high degree of probability and some you cannot and some choices you cannot choose because that choice is not a true choice or because that choice is despicable to you, would make your life not worth the salt of your tears, not worth living you mean, but despite your integrity some of your choices are to the detriment of humankind and possibly all existence, though that's hard to comprehend, but yet some of your choices have the possibility of bettering existence or humankind or life for a few individuals even if you cannot know their ramifications, not to mention your choices give you substance, essence, they make you, are you, you create you. You are after all and to begin with to some extent the author of your own story, or you have the potential to be, which is why you do not do nothing, which is why you scream, "What I do matters."

AUTHOR BIO

197.

Nicholas “Nick” Stokes was born in 1971 in Austin to Judge Bill Stokes and Lawyer Jillian Stokes. Nick was the youngest of seven siblings and throughout his childhood he exhibited considerable athletic and academic potential. After childhood he attended Texas A&M University. After college he joined the police department and took a job with the Dallas crime lab in Texas, where he specialized in hair and fiber analysis.

Feeling inferior under the skirts of his parents' professional achievements, Nick left Texas for Las Vegas. There Nick became his own man and in 1997 joined the successful Crime Scene Investigation team under the leadership of Gil Grissom. When Nick was kidnapped and buried alive in a glass coffin rigged with explosives and attacked by fire ants, Grissom soothed him by addressing him as “Pancho,” Nick’s father’s nickname for Nick.

In contrast with his colleagues, who preferred to keep an emotional distance, Nick empathized with victims and those affected by the crimes he investigated. Nick's empathy caused friction. He once confided to Catherine Willows that he was molested at age nine by a female babysitter. Lay psychologists hypothesize the trauma manifested in his trouble investigating crimes against children. Approximately halfway through his tenure Nick grew a moustache, but soon shaved it.

Nick was either a ladies' man or his only known romances were a brief affair with a prostitute named Kristi Hopkins and a date with Doctor Robbins's niece. His possible near celibacy might be explained by indications that becoming intimate with Nick leads to your downfall. He slept with Kristi; she was murdered later that night. Nick and his sisterly colleague Catherine went to a club; Nick hooks up with a woman; Catherine is drugged and abducted. After breakfast with the team at a diner, Nick stays behind to get a pretty waitress's number; outside, his colleague Warrick is murdered.

After Grissom’s departure, Nick was promoted to Assistant Supervisor and moved into Grissom’s office, which he shared with the fetal pig in a jar and an old tarantula. His promotion, however, was soon compromised. While pursuing the serial killer Nate Haskell in LA, Nick and Ray Langston were apprehended by the LAPD for going beyond their jurisdiction when Nick used his gun in an attempt to apprehend Haskell. Ray was accused of killing Haskell's Tina; it was later ascertained that Haskell was responsible.

Despite being well-adjusted, Nick has been made a victim repeatedly during his life. His car (and all the evidence inside it) was stolen (and subsequently

recovered). He was buried alive in a glass coffin lined with explosives and attacked by fire ants, as previously mentioned. He was held at gunpoint more than once. He was stalked by Nigel Crane, a cable guy, who threw him out of a second-story window. Nick was accused of killing a prostitute, Kristy Hopkins, with whom he enjoyed a one-night stand. Nick was victimized by a car bomb during a police funeral. He became the personal target of teenage bomber Jason McCann and was forced to shoot him in self-defense. He was shot and pretended to be dead before shooting Dr. Jekyll and rescuing supervisor Ray Langston.

This gunshot penetrated his psyche. When a suspect pulled a gun on him, Nick emptied his clip into him. Catherine comforted him by describing how she handled losing Warrick. She encouraged him to see a therapist. Eventually he did.

After Warrick's death, Nick set up a college fund for Warrick's son. He also flirted mildly with Catherine Willows. After receiving notice of Catherine's resignation, Nick broke down and told Catherine that she will always be with them, like wind in the willows.

Presumably there were many other episodes in Nick Stokes' life, but your time and your interest in others is finite. You have reported the facts of your investigation. You may create the rest of him with your imagination as you so choose, though you fear a part of him will never suffer the indignity of your comprehension.

Defying occasional thoughts of suicide, Nick held the longest tenure of any investigator in the Las Vegas Crime Scene Investigation unit, at 15 years. In 2015 he resigned his position and was named San Diego PD Crime Lab Director. As his old boss Gil would say and his recent boss Sara said, "You gotta go where you can do the most good."

OTHER TITLES by Nick Stokes

Novels:

Affair
You Choose
Artifact Collective

Novelette:

1 Day

Short, Flash, or Nothing Prose:

numerous

Plays:

quite a few

CONNECT WITH Nick Stokes

Author Website:

<http://www.nickstokes.net/>

Author Profile at Smashwords:

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